

'SCHYRE LEUEZ' AND CESSPITS: AN ECOCRITICAL  
READING OF LAND USE AND APOCALYPSE  
IN *CLEANNESS*

by

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Abstract

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This thesis examines land use and apocalypse in *Cleanness* in order to investigate how land use participates in the construction of medieval social and political systems and how the apocalyptic destruction the land acts out functions to make us question the primacy of the human in medieval thought. While some critics have discussed land use in the *Pearl*-Poet's works, they often discuss land in allegorical religious terms or in theories of space and place, rarely investigating the land's vital role in the construction of social and political order or its role in the preservation or destruction of mankind. This thesis will seek to fill this gap by providing an ecocritical reading that will focus primarily on *Cleanness* with a view to investigate two themes: the physical transformation of the land (presented as apocalyptic changes in *Cleanness*) and the human characters' interactions with the land (particularly as regards husbandry and its association with purity; an association that the land reflects as well). Land use and apocalypse are the main

environmental themes in the poem, and can also be extended to the other poems in the *Pearl* manuscript. Focusing on these relationships, particularly in *Cleanness*, will allow me to address the ways that land acts as material representation of medieval social and political hierarchies and concerns.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

At first, medieval texts and ecocriticism may seem strange bedfellows, and in some respects the hesitancy to read medieval texts ecocritically is understandable. After all, there is little doubt that there are fundamental philosophical differences between medieval texts like *Cleanness* and the section of ecocriticism more focused on non-human agency. Medieval society was focused primarily around religion; even the sciences were tinged with the supernatural. Often, the primacy of the human in the natural world was not given a second thought. Conversely, one of the primary motivations of ecocritical examinations of texts can be to question that primacy. However, these differences do not negate the possibility of fruitful ecocritical readings of medieval texts. On a broad level, both medieval texts and ecocritical theory are concerned with human interactions with the environment, and both can also be concerned with aspects of the apocalypse (if for different reasons and in different ways). While ecocritical readings of medieval texts are often conducted on texts that have clear "green" readings available,<sup>1</sup> it would be useful to expand the theory to texts not usually considered green.

This is particularly the case in *Cleanness*, a medieval text unusual both for its near zealous consideration of divine power and authority in addition to its

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<sup>1</sup> See Gillian Rudd's introduction for a prime example of an ecocritical reading of a medieval text with clear environmental implications.

treatment of the land. Although it is undoubtedly grounded in religious thought, *Cleanness* engages the environment in subtle but unusual ways that emphasize the positive relationship between humans and the role of the non-human in regulating humanity. By examining texts with roots in both medieval penitential literature and environmental thought, it will be possible to reveal nuances in medieval relationships with land that are relatively uninvestigated, and will also allow for an expansion of our understanding of how medieval philosophers thought about the land. In doing so, it becomes possible to revise critical thought about medieval texts, moving from traditional religious allegorical readings of medieval texts—which are, of course, valid—to more fertile readings of medieval texts that allow for an expansion of what it means to think about the environment in medieval terms. Therefore, my analysis of *Cleanness* will trouble the boundaries of medieval hierarchical conceptions of the environment by considering ways in which those hierarchies begin to simultaneously (and somewhat paradoxically) break down and reinforce themselves when confronted with non-human agency. Although it is clear that the *Pearl*-Poet was highly invested in the existing medieval social order, there is also an indication of interest in the boundaries between human and non-human and how those boundaries are reflected in medieval society. In order to further elucidate the terms of this investigation, this introduction will serve as a general overview of the differences and commonalities of medieval and ecocritical and environmentalist thought, and will



also speak on the subject of what ecocritical readings, especially of *Cleanness*, will allow for both medieval literary criticism and ecocriticism.

The purpose of all of this theoretical positioning is to demonstrate not only the feasibility, but also the effectiveness, of an ecocritical reading of medieval texts, which in this case will involve a reading of *Cleanness* and other of the *Pearl*-Poet's works. This reading is possible because of the way *Cleanness* engages with the environment in subtle and unusual ways: although much of the text is founded upon the environment's being under humanity's influence, it also gives the land the power to destroy humans. The land itself plays a role in regulating the human population, which, although based upon sinfulness and disobedience to God, still implies that the land is not totally subject to human dominion.

By examining *Cleanness* in light of both medieval philosophical mainstays—such as the religiously structured Great Chain of Being that simultaneously instilled both religious and social order among human and non-human entities and seems to be very much present in the dissemination of Noah's flood—and more politically inclined ecocriticism, I hope to reveal part of the political and social order that evolved along with the religious overtones of the text. So, although my investigation will trend towards less religious themes, it will still take into account the (justified) religious readings of the poem as well.

Seminal readings of the text, such as the one conducted by A.C. Spearing in *The Gawain-Poet: A Critical Study*, tend to focus upon the structure of *Cleanness*, emphasizing that "the poet's interpretation of the vice with which the poem is chiefly concerned, and his mangagment of the poem's structure" eventually shed light upon the contention that "the principle of structure is not a plot but a homiletic purpose."<sup>2</sup> Connecting the meaning of the poem to its function as a homiletic text serves several functions, some of which are possibly unintended. First, it allows for strict interpretations of the text solely as a text focused upon the question of whether spiritual cleanliness is attainable; something many critics have been arguing over for decades, but have yet to reach a decision on—in part because the definition of cleanliness in the poem is so multifarious. Second, tying the poem's meaning so closely to its structure as a homiletic or penitential text limit the kinds of readings conducted by critics; readings tend to deal with the religious aspects of the text, setting aside more secular connotations to the detriment of critical understanding of those secular social constructions.

Importantly, the way in which I examine the text—by focusing upon the action within the stories rather than the way in which those stories are structured—allow for an expansion of our understanding of these secular structures within the text. I do not focus upon the homiletic or penitential structure of the text, instead choosing to examine the textual events outside of their

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<sup>2</sup> A.C. Spearing, *The Gawain-Poet: A Critical Study* (NewYork: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 41.

structured framework. Looking outside of the framework of *Cleanness* does not mean disregarding the social or philosophical milieu surrounding the text—I do not forgo medieval social or philosophical tenets in my consideration of *Cleanness* as a text with possible ecocritical readings—but thinking about that milieu in a different way than other critics.

For example, in *Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth-century Apocalypse*, Morton W. Bloomfield argues that *Piers Plowman* "is concerned with the subject of Christian perfection rather than salvation," which "finds its natural expression in the apocalyptic frame of mind."<sup>3</sup> While there are clear connections between Bloomfield's reading of *Piers Plowman* and the idea of cleanliness or perfection in *Cleanness*, namely that both texts pursue the question of what it means to be spiritually pure, Bloomfield's focus upon the structure of *Piers Plowman* and how the apocalyptic scenes in that text reflect "characteristics of the Christian monastic tradition" once again parallels much traditional criticism of *Cleanness*.<sup>4</sup> In his argument, apocalypse is a symbol through which one can investigate medieval religious structures. However, as I argue, apocalypse can also be indicative of literal material relationships with the land; although usually considered a religious phenomenon, apocalypse can also be read in terms of ideas of social correctness and non-human agency.

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<sup>3</sup> Morton W. Bloomfield, *Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth-Century Apocalypse* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1961), vii.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, viii.

My intervention therefore becomes one of secular social significance. By looking at *Cleanness* in parts rather than in whole, and by thinking about its socio-political structures apart from its religious connotations, I exploit the gap many critics have ignored: specifically, the lack of consideration about *Cleanness* outside of a religious context. Conducting an ecocritical reading of *Cleanness* allows for a reading that emphasizes the often-overlooked aspects of the poem that deal with the construction of social and political constructions of medieval society. Additionally, reading *Cleanness* ecocritically also allows me to work on closing the gap between ecocriticism and medieval texts, which is still a relatively unexplored aspect of modern ecocritical theory.

The lack of ecocritical readings of *Cleanness* demonstrates a gap in contemporary criticism about the poem. As Gillian Rudd intimates in *Greenery: Ecocritical Readings of Late Medieval English Literature*, environmental readings are not often conducted on literary texts what seem to be indirectly concerned with the environment.<sup>5</sup> My thesis will therefore help establish a new discussion around poems not traditionally considered green, and can also help expand our understanding of when the consideration or awareness of non-human agency or material value began to permeate the way humans thought about themselves in relation to the environment. By further examining human and non-human relationships in medieval texts, we can more fully understand the vital role non-

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<sup>5</sup> Gillian Rudd, *Greenery: Ecocritical Readings of Late Medieval English Literature* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2007), 4.

human actors have in forming human social and political structures. This would involve shifting away from the anthropocentric idea that humans control the environment towards the idea that non-human actors interact with human ones in ways that leave both changed.

However, before I can begin investigating these interactions, I must elucidate my definition of environment, which, in its more modern sense, carries anachronistic connotations for readings of medieval texts. According the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, *environment* in the modern sense most readers will be familiar with—"The natural world or physical surroundings in general, either as a whole or within a particular geographical area, esp as affected by human activity"—was first used in that sense in 1948, approximately five hundred years after the creation of the *Pearl Manuscript*.<sup>6</sup> Even the earliest defined use of *environment* dates after the completion of the medieval period; the *OED* attributes that usage—in the sense of circumnavigation or surrounding something—to a 1603 translation of Plutarch's morals, although the word's etymology cites Middle French and Anglo-Norman instances of the word dating back to the thirteenth century that are associated with "proximity" and "periphery."<sup>7</sup> *Environmental* in the sense of "relating to the surroundings, physical context, or (particular) environment of a person, animal or thing" occurred even later in the word's

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<sup>6</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "Environment," accessed April 26, 2014, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/63089?redirectedFrom=environment>

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, "Environment."

etymology, branching from its noun root-word in 1873.<sup>8</sup> Clearly, tension arises between the use of such a modern term when writing about medieval texts, although that tension is by no means insuperable.

Although *environment* and *environmental* did not emerge in the contemporary sense until the late nineteenth or mid twentieth century, concern about the natural world and humans' effects on it were still present in medieval society, even though the terms were different. Often, the *Pearl*-Poet uses the word *folde* to indicate when he is speaking about the land. The *Middle English Dictionary* defines *folde* as "The Earth" or "the world," seeming to ascribe to *folde* the same general sense of place given to *environment* by the *OED*.<sup>9</sup> The most important difference between the two terms is that *folde* lacks the idea of human affect upon the land, whereas *environment* is a word specifically concerned with that affect. However, as I argue throughout my thesis, the *Pearl*-Poet does not appear to be unconcerned with the affect humans have upon the land around them; rather, his musings on land use and apocalypse indicate that medievals thought about human affect.

Consequently, the difference seems to be one of terms and the context in which those terms exist. The context in which the *Pearl*-Poet thought about human affect on the *folde* and non-human inhabitants was mired in

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<sup>8</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "Environmental," accessed April 26, 2014, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/63090?redirectedFrom=environmental>

<sup>9</sup> *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. "fold(e)," accessed 26 April, 2014, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/lookup.html>.

anthropocentric societal constructions: thinking about the land was always conducted in terms of benefit to humans or in terms of given human dominion. *Environment*, on the other hand, is linked to the land itself, and its linguistic and cultural association with the environmentalist movement and environmental activism often give the word connotations that distance the land from human control. *Environment* also has more modern scientific connotations that are unaccessable from medieval thought due to the separation between post-Scientific Reformation sciences and earlier forms of natural philosophy. Throughout my thesis, I have therefore attempted to use *environment* only when talking about contemporary texts, thereby avoiding dissonance with medieval ideas of land. Rather, when I refer to non-human entities in *Cleanness* or other medieval texts, I use the term *land* when I write about the physical surroundings or *non-human*<sup>10</sup> in order to avoid the more modern scientific and social connotations of *environment*.

One of the main tensions regarding ecocritical readings of medieval texts is the secular tendency of ecocritical theory as opposed to the theocentric foundation of medieval texts, particularly texts like *Cleanness* in which theocentrism is one of the main concerns. These clear foundational differences in outlook raise potential problems for considerations of texts like *Cleanness*.

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<sup>10</sup> Of course, one could also argue that *non-human* also has connotations that medieval authors or philosophers would also not have considered, especially concerning biopolitics and agency. However, I find *non-human* to be less problematic than either *plant* or *animal* (particularly animal, which ascribes unwanted connotations of absolute otherness) and as such use it throughout my thesis.

However, the eschatological roots of ecocriticism are acknowledged by modern ecocritics Garrard and Lawrence Buell: both critics address the long history of environmental considerations within the religious.<sup>11</sup> Garrard, in particular, focuses upon connections between ancient Judeo-Christian models of apocalypse as well as Roman conceptions of dwelling found in Virgil's *Georgics*.<sup>12</sup> Buell acknowledges the ongoing debate surrounding domination and cultivation in Genesis.<sup>13</sup> While it is unlikely that there will ever be an exact exchange between modern ecocritical thought and medieval texts, in order to better understand the full potential of both periods it is necessary to examine the tension between religion and the environment—and how they intersect—more closely.

In spite of the more secular attitudes of ecocriticism, several critics have called for a reexamination of ecological thought in light of spirituality. In her essay "Beyond 'Thou Shalt Not': An Ecocritic Reads Deuteronomy," Betsy S. Hilbert writes, "[i]n the community of ecological awareness, one often comes across a sense that traditional Western religions have historically been at fault for rationalizing and supporting traditional Western environmental destruction."<sup>14</sup> She then quotes early ecocritic Lynn White Jr., who writes that "'since the roots of

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<sup>11</sup> Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Lawrence Buell, "The Emergence of Environmental Criticism, in *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 2.

<sup>12</sup> Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 119-122

<sup>13</sup> Buell, *Future of Environmental Criticism*, 2

<sup>14</sup> Betsy S. Hilbert in "Beyond 'Thou Shalt Not'," *Beyond Nature Writing*, edited by Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 30.



our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not."<sup>15</sup> Hilbert then goes on to emphasize White's proposal, arguing that White was "seeking the strands within traditional religions that have persistently avowed human responsibility for the care of creation."<sup>16</sup> While some critics might reject White's idea about the spirituality of ecocritical thought, it is the very idea of "human responsibility for the care of [non-human] creation" that underlies modern ideas of ecological stewardship.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, although religious thought and ecocritical theory do not always directly correspond, it is evident that there are continuities between the two philosophies.

However, this continuity is once again threatened by a break between ecocriticism and medieval thought, specifically as regards their conceptions of the environment. Ecocriticism, at its most basic level, is concerned with literary portrayals of the environment and the extent to which non-human agents in texts are portrayed as figures of agency or lack of agency. It stems from the larger modern school of thought that gave us environmentalism, which, as Greg Garrard argues in *Ecocriticism*, positions ecocritical theory as "an avowedly political mode of analysis . . . . closely related to environmentally oriented developments in philosophy and political theory."<sup>18</sup> Additionally, ecocriticism's close relationship to ecology also places it nearer scientific thought than many other

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<sup>15</sup> White quoted in Hilbert, *Beyond Nature Writing*, 30-31.

<sup>16</sup> Hilbert, "Beyond 'Thou Shalt Not,'" 31.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>18</sup> Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 3-4.

contemporary theories.<sup>19</sup> This leads to a theory centered more on the environment as its own agent with political power that is removed from medieval philosophy simply because of its post Scientific Reformation formulation.

On the other hand, medieval considerations of the environment often presupposed human agency, focusing on patriarchal conceptions of the environment that disallowed agency or rebellion. This is especially clear in *Cleanness*, a medieval penitential text<sup>20</sup> that is founded upon the basic patristic notion that although humans have dominion over the non-human life on earth, God ultimately controls all of creation, even unto its destruction. When this control is challenged, the land becomes a tool through which God visits destruction, and the environment thereby becomes an allegory for divine power. Indeed, much traditional scholarship focuses upon allegorical readings of *Cleanness*. Importantly, though, these allegorical readings often focus upon the environment viewed through a religious lens to the neglect of others, particularly examinations of the work that focus on less religious elements of the text. This is where ecocriticism becomes a useful tool for revealing the secular implications of medieval literature.

Ecocriticism could be a return to—or, as Latour argues in *We Have Never Been Modern*, a continuation of—earlier philosophies in which the lines between

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>20</sup> Medieval penitential literature can loosely be defined as literature and religious material focusing upon sins and their punishment.

traditionally divided disciplines like literature and science become less clear. Latour's theory and ecological thought intersect at considerations of nature. According to Latour, "[s]o long as Nature was remote and under control [in the 'modern' era], it still vaguely resembled the constitutional pole of tradition, and science could still be seen as a mere intermediary to uncover it. Nature seemed to be held in reserve, transcendent, inexhaustible, distant enough."<sup>21</sup> However, because of the constructed distance between Nature and science and the modern perception of Nature as controllable by science, hybrids (ideas, disciplines, or subjects which are both Natural and scientific, such as some ecocriticism) began to grow exponentially at the expense of that separation. As a result, these hybrids—complications that arise in spite of the seemingly concrete divide between science and nature—have overwhelmed the modern system: it has created too many contradictions for a simple Nature/science, modern/pre-modern divide to support.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, as Latour argues, "No one has ever been modern."<sup>23</sup> In other words, although moderns have insisted upon the sanctity of the division between Nature and science, the presence of Nature/science hybrids belies the selfsame modern system modernists propose, and suggests instead that we have never left the old ways of thinking about our world behind.<sup>24</sup> Because

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<sup>21</sup> Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, translated by Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 50.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 50-51.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 46-48.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 46-47.

there is no longer so great a divide between medieval and modern, it is possible to reexamine medieval texts in light of modern theory in a way that is fruitful rather than anachronistic.

That such readings are not anachronistic is reflected in a series of questions Jonathan Gil Harris proposes at the end of *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral*. He asks the reader, "[a]re we dealing (as the 'Animal, Vegetable, Mineral' parlor game) with taxonomies of the natural world that presume, as did Linneaus in his *Systema Naturae* of 1735, the exteriority of the nonhuman to the human?"<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, the definition of the human "exterior" to the non-human is very much akin to Aristotle's elucidation of *tyche*, a theory still accepted in the medieval period.<sup>26</sup> According to Aristotle, *tyche* is closely tied to human endeavors and "must always be connected with our doings and farings—a truth indicated by the common belief that good fortune (*tyche*) is the same, or much the same thing, as 'happiness.'"<sup>27</sup> He goes on to connect *tyche* with human culture specifically by postulating, "doing well' or 'ill' by *tyche* is impossible to creatures that have no self-direction. That is why neither inanimate things nor brute beasts nor infants can ever accomplish anything by *tyche*, since they exercise no

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<sup>25</sup> Jonathan Gil Harris. "Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Twenty Questions," in *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics and Objects*, edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Washington, DC: Oliphant Books, 2012), 290.

<sup>26</sup> Jonathan Gil Harris, in "Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Twenty Questions," 290; Aristotle, in *Aristotle: The Physics*, 2 vols., translated by Philip H. Wickstead and Francis M. Cornford (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 1.2.6.

<sup>27</sup> Aristotle, *Aristotle: The Physics*, 1.2.6.

deliberate choice."<sup>28</sup> Although Aristotle's definition is in opposition to some ecocritical scientific theory (and, to a certain extent, medieval theological writings that give certain animals some modicum of control over their actions or reactions—think the raven and the dove or the animals in the manger), it nonetheless represents an attempt to explore Nature through a scientific lens, which leads to a reflection upon human culture. Therefore, in spite of some (rather large) differences—particularly as regards human and non-human agency—both investigations are founded upon similar principles that meld scientific endeavor with human culture.

Additionally, one can draw parallels between the narrative of medieval natural philosophy and more recent scientific developments. According to Donna Haraway in her introduction to *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science*,

the history of science appears as a narrative about the history of technical and social means to produce the facts. The facts themselves are types of stories, of testimony to experience. . . . Scientific practice may be considered a kind of story-telling practice—a rule-governed, constrained, historically changing craft of narrating the history of nature. . . . Scientific practice is above all a story-telling practice in the sense of historically specific practices of interpretation and testimony. (Haraway, *Primate Visions* [New York: Routledge, 1989,] 4).

In other words, science is a narrative mode that reveals cultural norms and ideas just as other narratives do. It is constructed, and can therefore represent the

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 1.2.6.

culturally contingent codes of the society implementing the narrative. If we reexamine the example of Aristotelian *tyche*, one can discern an attempted objective explanation of why humans, and not animals, possess reason. *Tyche* is connected to narratives of anthropocentric definitions of reason, implied by the term "deliberate choice," and the social hierarchies placing humans above animals (an idea clearly conveyed by "brute beast").<sup>29</sup> In this case, ideas that are supported by other cultural narratives, such as literature and even legal documents, are also present in documents of natural philosophy. These constructions of human and non-human are also present in texts like *Cleanness*, which, while divorced from the scientific discourse in which Aristotle participated, still understands the non-human in hierarchical terms.

Of course, this is not to say that ecocritical theory and medieval texts coexist or meld seamlessly into simple and uncomplicated readings: such a perfect interrelation between the two is highly unlikely, not the least due to the over half a millennia time gap between the two schools of thought in which the ways of interacting with the environment have undergone cultural shifts. Rather, what I hope to do in this thesis is to demonstrate that such readings open new ways of thinking for both medieval and environmentally oriented texts. I am not the first to notice that, as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen so aptly wrote, "The past is not past, is not an absolute difference. Nor is the past conjoined to the present in

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<sup>29</sup> Aristotle, *The Physics*, vol. 1.2.6

continuity, in dreary sameness. Past, present and future are a knot, thick with possibility even while impossible to fully untangle."<sup>30</sup> Fortunately, there are some threads critics can begin to pull.

Ecocritics and medievalists like Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Gillian Rudd engage in readings of medieval texts that expand ideas about both medieval and environmental texts. In his recent anthology, *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics and Objects*, Jeffrey Cohen and other ecocritics "make a cogent, collective argument that things matter in a double sense: the study of animals, plants, stones, tracks, stools, and other objects can lead us to important new insights about the past and present," focusing upon the premise that "the human is not the world's sole meaning-maker, and never has been."<sup>31</sup> Similarly, Rudd aims to "demonstrate the fruitfulness of mixing green concerns and literary analysis."<sup>32</sup> Importantly, both critics also acknowledge the difficulties and dangers of reading medieval texts ecocritically; Rudd in particular calls for an awareness of anachronistic readings.<sup>33</sup> Both critics also focus upon expanding our understanding of medieval texts and philosophies by emphasizing that periodization limits the possible ecocritical readings of texts. Medieval ecocritics have opened the way for a reinterpretation of what it means to be both medieval and modern. They allow for

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<sup>30</sup> Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "In the Middle of Early Modern," in *The Journal of Early Modern Cultural Studies* 13.3 (2013), 131.

<sup>31</sup> Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Introduction," in *Animal Vegetable Mineral*, edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Washington, DC: Oliphaunt Books, 2012), 7.

<sup>32</sup> Rudd, *Greenery*, 17.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

the examination of commonalities in medieval and less ecocritically read texts that are relatively uninvestigated, especially in texts that are not immediately green in nature. Ecocritical readings of medieval texts also reveal nuances in the medieval relationship to the land that are relatively unthought-of, and also pave the way for a reconsideration of medieval portrayals of the land as strictly allegorical.

The shift away from religious allegory subsequently leads towards examinations of medieval literature that expand modern critics' understanding of medieval secular structures, such as the relationship between stewards and the land they tend or how apocalypse in medieval texts has political implications in addition to religious ones. This is especially the case in Eleanor Johnson's "The Poetics of Waste: Medieval English Ecocriticism," in which Johnson provides a reading of medieval texts focused less upon religious social structures, although she does address the larger social deployments of religious texts.<sup>34</sup> She focuses upon "three premodern discourses on waste—legal, penitential, and poetic" in order to elucidate later ideas about waste.<sup>35</sup> By analyzing the three different conceptions of waste in the medieval period, Johnson is able to demonstrate the efficacy of a shift away from religious allegorical readings towards a more secular examination of medieval society that allows for new and important discoveries to

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<sup>34</sup> Eleanor Johnson, "The Poetics of Waste: Medieval English Ecocriticism," in *PMLA* 127.3 (2012), 460-476.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 460-461.



be made. Additionally, although she does discuss waste in religious texts, she does so in conjunction with medieval legal discourse, which results in a reading that is focused more upon how religious ideas were deployed or present in other areas of medieval thought.<sup>36</sup> She concludes her essay by noting, "poetic form offers a mode of staging meditations on complex, multilayered social problems."<sup>37</sup> By shifting the focus toward more literal readings of medieval texts, including religious ones, Johnson and other medieval ecocritics pave the way for less allegorical examinations of medieval literature even as they acknowledge the influence of religion upon medieval society and social structures.

In spite of the difficulty inherent in untangling the temporal jumble which medieval ecocritics find themselves in, it is possible to note some particular trends, among them stewardship and apocalypse. According to Garrard, stewardship (or, as he terms it less anthropocentrically, dwelling) involves "the long-term imbrication of humans in a landscape of memory, ancestry and death, of ritual, life and work."<sup>38</sup> He then goes on to describe two models of dwelling: Georgic and Modern Georgic. Georgic dwelling is based upon Virgil's *Georgics*, and often involves practical advice that emphasizes good farming practices rather than religious observance.<sup>39</sup> Garrard splits Modern Georgics to align with three

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 462-463.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 473.

<sup>38</sup> Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 117.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 118-119.

theorists: Wendell Berry, John Berger, and Kirkpatrick Sale.<sup>40</sup> Because of continuities between Berry and medieval ideas of stewardship that will soon become clear, I will focus upon Berry. According to Garrard, the Christian stewardship ideals of modern-day "Kentuckian Wendell Berry" espouse the belief that "Man's divinely ordained dominion is not simply a dispensation of power, but a demand from God that we take responsibility for the natural world."<sup>41</sup> Interestingly, in the *Pearl*-Poet's work, both kinds of stewardship are visible; the parable of the workers in the vineyard in *Pearl* demonstrates both good farming practices and Christian ideals, and in *Cleanness* Abraham, in his role as a wealthier landowner, is a paragon of sober Christian responsibility and piety.

Apocalypse, the second kind of environmental event I plan on examining in more detail later, also presents several continuities between medieval texts and contemporary thought about the environment. Importantly, though, there is a cultural break between medieval and present-day apocalypse; medieval apocalypse is often begun out of religious misdeeds, while Garrard defines more modern apocalypse stories with a general anxiety about worldly destruction.<sup>42</sup> However, he also addresses medieval literary land destruction, citing Jeanne Kay's argument that

the Bible is . . . theocentric in a way and to a degree difficult for the modern reader to fully accept: 'A society which explains

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>41</sup> Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 123.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 93.

destruction of pasturage as the result of God's anger over idolatry or insincerity in Temple sacrifices rather than as the direct outcome of climatic fluctuations or overgrazing may have little to offer modern resource management. (Kay, qtd in *Ecocriticism*, 118)

While this is certainly part of the impetus behind the apocalypse in *Cleanness*, it by no means indicates a dearth of ecocritical readings that can be gleaned from the text. In my thesis, I investigate apocalypse as a primarily environmental tool, which, in and of itself, is not at odds with medieval natural philosophy. Rather, by working with a combination of religious and more worldly motives with regard to apocalypse in *Cleanness*, I intend to demonstrate that the genesis of ecological thought occurred far earlier than modern ecocritics suppose, particularly through the *Pearl*-Poet's agential portrayal of the land.

J.P. Fokkelman describes the structure of Genesis as one of "birth and holocaust:" a fitting parallel for the procession of events in *Cleanness*.<sup>43</sup> However, that birth and holocaust extends not only to the human subject of the poem (and the *Pearl*-Poet's larger body of works), but also to the land which those humans inhabit. *Cleanness* does not merely mark the circle of human and religious birth and death, but also the birth and death of the environment. Through an analysis of land use and destruction in *Cleanness* I will demonstrate that the land is not merely manipulated by humans and God, but actively takes part in the process of

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<sup>43</sup> J.P. Fokkelman, "Genesis," in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, edited by Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 49.

creation and destruction. The land throughout the *Pearl*-Poet's work, but specifically in *Cleanness*, becomes an actor in its own right.

However, that environmental agent, much like the human agents it rebels against or allows to settle on its surface, still acts within set parameters of medieval thought. The land, much like the human who resides upon it, cannot ultimately escape the control exerted by God. In that respect, both humans and non-humans are each controlled by what are accepted as divine or cosmic forces. Although both are agential to an extent, they are still both enmeshed in a system that leaves them inferior. In spite of Jerome Cohen's assertion that "things matter"—certainly a valid assertion in an anthology that does not consider religious texts or objects—the things that matter in *Cleanness* exist in a religious continuum that emphatically insists upon the futility of rebellion against an all-seeing, all-powerful divine being.<sup>44</sup> One of my goals, therefore, is to examine how "things matter" in a medieval religious outlook. Does the control exerted by God necessarily exclude the possibility of a modicum of agency with regards to His creation? How do humans and the land exist in a continuum that values religion so highly, and how does that effect the construction of political and social order and thought? Part of this thesis will examine those connections and how they are reflected in *Cleanness*.

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<sup>44</sup> Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral*, 7.

My text will join a growing number of forays by other scholars such as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, Gillian Rudd, Eleanor Johnson, and others that intend to expand the notion of just what it means to be medieval, modern, or any combination of the two through an examination of treatments of the environment and interaction with the environment in medieval texts. My readings of the text will merge medieval theory about nature and that natural world with ecocriticism in a way that broadens both rather than imposing the theory upon the subject anachronistically. By opening ecocritical theory to realms other than the mostly scientific, I will expand our idea of what, exactly, ecocriticism is and does with regard to what are traditionally considered pre-modern texts. Additionally, by considering medieval literature in light of modern ecocritical theory I open the text to readings that differ from the traditionally allegorical (which themselves are not incorrect, but limiting), which allows for a greater understanding of the social constructs surrounding land use and apocalypse.

## Chapter 2

### Environmentalism Thought and Ecocritical Situating

The tension between modern environmentally focused texts and medieval texts is most clearly illustrated through apocalypse. There are both departures and likenesses in the treatment of apocalypse in medieval literature, modern texts concerned with the environment, and ecocritical theory, which I examine more closely in this chapter. I focus on modern theoretical and literary texts to better indicate the conversation surrounding apocalypse. The goal of this chapter is to demonstrate that in spite of the discord between the two models of thought similarities exist that cannot be ignored. These include human responsibility, moral and ethical tones, political agenda, spirituality, and the tension between proper and improper land use.

In order to better understand the exchange between medieval literature and modern environmental thought, I must first elucidate the apocalyptic tendencies of contemporary environmental texts. Much like medieval penitential literature, apocalypse in these novels and articles often stems from a place of human responsibility; there is a sense in both medieval texts and ecocritical theory, different though they may be temporally, that focuses upon the idea of impending human instigated doom. In other words, we humans need to change our actions immediately or face the end of the world. Indeed, the entirety of *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson's formative text about environmental awareness, hinges upon

apocalyptic tensions that can only be resolved by an immediate abnegation of destructive chemicals. In texts that can be read ecocritically, this change can take the form of changing the way that we interact with the environment from a relationship of stewardship to one of dwelling. This is especially the case in both Jane Smiley's *1000 Acres*, which demonstrates more traditional ideas of stewardship as taking care of the earth for humans' benefit, and Ruth Ozeki's *All Over Creation*, which juxtaposes and confuses the boundaries of stewardship and dwelling in order to produce a relationship with the earth that is built on preservation for the sake of the the land and future humans. Although the exchange between modern environmental apocalypse and medieval religious apocalypse is not always equal, there are several observable similarities and connections one can make between the two outlooks. First, however, I must more clearly establish ecocritical theory, and then proceed to environmental apocalypse.

Ecocritical theory came to fruition in the mid-to-late twentieth century, flourishing alongside the growing environmentalist movement. At its most basic level, ecocriticism involves reconciling and blending the boundaries between the academic traditions of science and literature.<sup>45</sup> According to ecocritic Cheryll Glotfelty, "ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment . . . . [it] takes an earth-centered approach to literary

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<sup>45</sup> Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 3.

analysis."<sup>46</sup> As a result, ecocritics are often concerned with making connections between what have traditionally been the divided academic disciplines of nature and culture, paying particular attention—both subconsciously and consciously—to the hybridity Latour describes at their intersection. In doing so, it is possible for medieval ecocritics to bridge gaps between both ecocritical and medievalist disciplines.

Interdisciplinary work therefore evolves and grows through ecocritical readings. While ecocritics can make connections between the humanities and social sciences, they also consider crossing more modern disciplinary boundaries like the sciences. Garrard considers the importance of interdisciplinary considerations of the environment when he states that

environmental problems require analysis in cultural as well as scientific terms, because they are the outcome of an interaction between ecological knowledge of nature and its cultural inflection. This will involve interdisciplinary scholarship that draws on literary and cultural theory, philosophy, sociology, psychology and environmental history, as well as ecology. . . .To confront the vast, complex, multifarious agglomeration of ecological crises with the apparently flimsy tools of cultural analysis must be seen by the ecocritic as moral and political necessity. . . . (Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 16)

Clearly, ecocriticism's very nature is to draw together various disciplines and ways of thought in order to more clearly delineate the importance of ecological thought. This allows for a new way of looking at texts that does not rely upon merely one aspect of analysis, but upon examining the text in light of several

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<sup>46</sup> Cheryll Glotfelty, quoted in Garrard's *Ecocriticism*, p. 3.



different disciplines, each of which may have a different relationship to the subject. As a result, ecocritical readings open texts up to new readings where they may not have been considered before, such as medieval texts like *Cleanness* that are not explicitly concerned with the environment.

Of course, these central concerns do not mean that ecocriticism is a homogenous movement in and of itself. Buell has noted that the field of ecocriticism has evolved in waves, with "second wave" ecocritics focused more upon the relationship between the humanities and science, while "first wave" ecocriticism "was initially understood to be synchronous with the aims of earthcare."<sup>47</sup> My thesis falls more along the lines of first wave ecocriticism, due partially to the fact that there is more evidence of a possibility of agreement regarding medieval land use and apocalypse to similar ideas in ecocriticism rather than an investment in reconciling medieval texts and modern scientific theory. Additionally, the themes with which the so-called "first wave" of ecocriticism are concerned were equally pertinent in medieval times.

Additionally, although modern ecocriticism is often concerned with more modern science, it has roots in much older movements. According to Buell, ecocriticism's focus upon "'the idea of nature' has been a dominant or at least residual concern for literary scholars and intellectual historians ever since those

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<sup>47</sup> Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005), 21-22.

fields came into being."<sup>48</sup> Michael P. Cohen, in his essay "Blues in the Green: Ecocriticism Under Critique," also notes that Buell's emphasis on nature writing allows for four common characteristics shared by texts that can be read ecocritically: the imbrication of human and natural history through a portrayal of the "nonhuman environment . . . not merely as a framing device" but as an agent in its own right, the consideration of non-human interests, human responsibility towards the environment, and "a sense of the environment as a process rather than a constant" (which is akin to dwelling).<sup>49</sup> While these elements are clearly observable in modern texts directly concerned with environmental ideas, they are also traceable in medieval texts like *Cleanness*, which, although not explicitly concerned with ecocritical ideas, also engage in similar relationships with nature. These four unifying characteristics allow for consistency when considering which texts could be considered for ecocritical readings, even if those texts might be unconventional choices for ecocritical examination.

More recently, ecocriticism has been expanding into the territory of non-natural, "built" environments, which in turn leads to a reconsideration of what, exactly, constitutes environment. According to Kathleen R. Wallace and Karla Armbruster in their Introduction to *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*, "environment also includes cultivated and built

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>49</sup> Buell in Michael P. Cohen, "Blues in the Green: Ecocriticism under Critique," in *Environmental History* 9.1 (2004), 15.

landscapes, the natural elements and aspects of those landscapes, and cultural interactions with those natural elements."<sup>50</sup> This creates a "nature-culture dualism" that must be challenged "by exploring the role of nature in texts more concerned with human cultures, by looking at the role of culture in nature, and by attending to the nature-focused text as also a cultural literary text."<sup>51</sup> This is particularly helpful when considering that apocalyptic environmental texts involve the agency of one environment (usually the natural) at the expense of another (most often the built, as in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in *Cleanness*). If built environments are demonstrative of direct human influence upon the non-human world—the exertion of the human culture upon a particular place, like a city—then the natural world's destruction of that specifically human place in environmental texts could be an indication of cultural dissatisfaction. Examining this destructive give-and-take in a larger cultural milieu will therefore allow for a greater understanding of both the environment and human culture's impact upon it.

In spite of the evolution and differentiation of the various modes of environmental and ecological thought, there are still several threads that run consistently throughout the theory. One of these is the idea of human responsibility for environmental catastrophe, which has been a central theme of

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<sup>50</sup> Kathleen R. Wallace and Karla Armbruster, "Introduction: Why Go Beyond Nature Writing, and Where To," in *Beyond Nature Writing* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 4.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

environmentalism and then ecocriticism since the mid-twentieth century, when *Silent Spring* and other texts began to investigate human responsibility for environmental change in more depth than previous scholars. This trend continues today in modern environmentalist texts like Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*, which, in its additional role as a moral and political text, further complicates the position of environmentalist thought by enmeshing several agendas within one text.

Regardless of these complications, though, human responsibility for global climate change is still a primary component of ecological thought. As previously mentioned, one of the defining elements of a text that can be read ecocritically is that "[h]uman accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation."<sup>52</sup> Indeed, this tenet applies equally to literary and non-literary environmentalism: it is likely that at the heart of the vast majority of environmentally oriented texts there exists some sense of human culpability. Unfortunately, Michael Cohen's adaptation of Buell's tenets implies that ecocritical readings of texts engage in these ideas explicitly, which poses complications for readings of texts whose ethics may not be founded in environmentalism, such as medieval texts. Also problematically, limiting ecocritical readings to texts explicitly engaged with human responsibility for

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<sup>52</sup> Michael P. Cohen, "Blues in the Green," 15.

environmental destruction limits the scope of what constitutes an ecocritical reading of a text.

However, there are clear connections in medieval texts, particularly in *Cleanness*, between human action and non-human reaction that demonstrate an implicit concern about the environment that the religious overtones of the text obscure. While these worldly repercussions are mediated by a divine being, they are nonetheless earthly in their execution, implying human responsibility for the destruction. Grounding ecocriticism in terms of responsibility for the environment therefore generally allows for readings of texts that engage environmentalism less explicitly than more modern environmentalist texts.

Both environmental apocalypse and medieval texts also exhibit a relation of causality with regard to human action. Although this causality can be unstated in environmental texts, it is often the case that one of the foundational points of the text is the causal relationship between human action and the resulting apocalypse. In environmentalist texts and thought, this is most often represented by the specter of global warming. In his article, "Climate Change, Responsibility, and Justice," Dale Jamieson cites a 1997 study that "assessed the human impact on nature."<sup>53</sup> The study found that not only had humans irrevocably changed "between one-third and one half of Earth's land surface" and appropriated the majority of natural resources, but that humans had also increased "carbon dioxide

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<sup>53</sup> Vitousek and others, quoted in Dale Jamieson, "Climate Change, Responsibility, and Justice," in *Science and Engineering Ethics* 16 (2010), 440.

in the atmosphere . . . by more than 30% since the beginning of the industrial revolution."<sup>54</sup> This demonstrates not only the change instigated by humans on a massive scale, but also implies that humanity is the primary cause for such a drastic rise in climate change.<sup>55</sup> Human responsibility is also the foundation underlying Edward O. Wilson's *The Future of Life*, particularly his discussion on what he terms "the bottleneck." He argues that human overconsumption has escalated to the point that "[w]e have driven atmospheric carbon dioxide to the highest levels in at least two hundred thousand years, unbalanced the nitrogen cycle, and contributed to a global warming that will ultimately be bad news everywhere."<sup>56</sup> In both Jamieson's and Wilson's texts, humans are viewed as the root cause of global warming. Human actions have lead to the present climatological crisis, and as such humans are responsible for the impending apocalypse should drastic behavioral changes not be made.

Although the causality of medieval apocalyptic texts is based mostly in concepts of sin, the connection in both texts between human responsibility and environmental catastrophe is clear. In *Cleanness*, human disregard for God's natural law leads to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. However, responsibility for this destruction ultimately rests in the actions of the citizens of those cities. In spite of differences in execution of this responsibility (religious

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 440.

<sup>55</sup> Although climates do cycle through increased periods of heat or cold, such quick and drastic changes indicate a larger cause than merely another natural climactic cycle.

<sup>56</sup> Edward O. Wilson, *The Future of Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 23.

reasons versus scientific interpretation and analysis of data), the concern present within these texts indicates an available means of connecting the two periods' concerns. The heart of the matter ultimately relies upon human culpability and responsibility, regardless of differences in execution.

Another major trend in environmental writing is the moral and ethical tone of many of these texts. This sense of morality permeates many aspects of environmentalist texts, often engaging questions about the ethicality of human actions in addition to the idea of responsibility. There has risen around the environmentalist movement a distinctly moral tone, often the result of considering human responsibility for climate change and the discussion of what can be done to regulate or reduce the pace of climate change. This is especially evident in texts like Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*, in which he speaks of combating climate change as "*a generational mission*" and describes "the exhilaration of a compelling *moral purpose*" that "is not really about politics at all. It is a moral and spiritual challenge."<sup>57</sup> He repeats his plea moments later, saying that climate change "is not ultimately about any scientific discussion or political dialogue. It is about who we are as human beings. . . . This is a moral, ethical, and spiritual challenge."<sup>58</sup> While undoubtedly pithy and somewhat skewed (especially regarding the statement about climate change as a scientific problem), Gore's text outlines in no uncertain terms one of the implicit justifications for stewardship

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<sup>57</sup> Al Gore, "An Inconvenient Truth" in *Mother Earth News*, Oct/Nov 2006, 58. Emphasis his.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

theory and ideas about human responsibility: because humans are responsible for climate change, they are morally obligated to work towards the resolution or mitigation of that change.

Interestingly, the moral side of ecological thought can often lead into political discussions regarding the environment that results in a complexly enmeshed discussion of morality, politics, and religion. Psychologists Matthew Feinberg and Robb Willer conducted a study, first published in 2012, in which they examined the politically divided nature of American environmentalism.<sup>59</sup> In their findings, they noted that while the majority environmentalists who consider climate change a moral problem are liberal, conservative environmentalists also responded to certain moral appeals, particularly attitudes of purity and sanctity.<sup>60</sup> Ultimately, Feinberg and Willer apply these ideas to politically conservative religious groups, suggesting that because "most of the world's religions emphasize humanity's role as stewards of the each charged with keeping pure and sacred God's creation . . . reframing moral rhetoric around the environment to fit with this religious tenet might be persuasive to many religious individuals."<sup>61</sup> Such a mix of religion and politics also plays out in Gore's text, which, as I mentioned earlier, speaks of environmentalism in religious terms and frames humanity's duty

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<sup>59</sup> Matthew Feinberg and Robb Willer, "The Moral Roots of Environmental Attitudes," in *Psychological Science* 24:1 (2013).

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 61



to the environment as a spiritual one.<sup>62</sup> This somewhat paradoxical conflation of moral, political, and religious motivations regarding climate change illustrates that although ecocritics do distance themselves from traditionally religious views, the ecological movement is so complexly enmeshed in popular society that separation from moral or spiritual interpretations of humans' relationship with the environment is unlikely.

Politicization is also an issue in less conventionally political texts (in the governmental sense of the word) that avoid the hyper-emotional rhetoric favored by Gore. Politicization of the environment is especially pertinent to biopolitical examinations, specifically as regards human treatment of the non-human. In his text *Before the Law: Humans and Other Animals in a Biopolitical Frame*, Cary Wolfe contends that

the exercise of violence on the terrain of biopower is not always, or even often, one of highly symbolic and sacrificial ritual in some timeless political theater, but is often—indeed, maybe usually—an affair of power over and of life that is regularized, routinized, and banalized in the services of a strategic, not symbolic, project.  
(Wolfe, *Before the Law* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012], 27.)

Although Wolfe is writing about the relationship of violence enacted upon the non-human, his connection to the political raises pertinent concerns for apocalyptic environmental texts. Of particular concern is Wolfe's insistence upon a direct "strategic project;" in modern texts about apocalypse, the destruction can

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<sup>62</sup> Gore, "An Inconvenient Truth," 58.

often send a political message, specifically about the need for reforming human interactions with the environment. The destruction becomes a message with political import and goals in and of itself. The same could be said for medieval texts concerning religious apocalypse. Although the motivation may be religious, there is still a specific goal in mind (a "strategic project") that is being implemented by a religious institution with the power to "routinize." Apocalypse therefore represents an attempt to see biopolitical violence in reverse: although in these texts the violence is still ultimately traceable to human authors, the violence—which destroys humans and human political structures in addition to non-human, since apocalypse necessarily means the destruction of non-human resources in the area that is decimated—represents a politics more concerned with the environment than with human dominance. By allowing the environment, rather than humans, to be a destructive force environmental apocalypse advocates for a more environmentally conscious politics.

Although ecological thought, particularly in its political context, is often divorced from religion, the two are not entirely incompatible. For instance, Wilson maintains that "[f]or the Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the environmental ethic is compatible with belief in the holiness of the Earth and the perception of nature as God's handiwork."<sup>63</sup> Wilson notes that both Catholic and Orthodox leaders of the church have acknowledged ecological

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<sup>63</sup> Wilson, *The Future of Life*, 157.

change: "Pope John Paul II has affirmed that 'the ecological crisis is a moral issue,'" and Patriarch Bartholomew I described environmental destruction at the hands of humans sins.<sup>64</sup> Wilson suggests that collaboration between science and religion is a possibility brought about by "the same innate attraction to nature."<sup>65</sup> While his connections are based upon the humanistic assumptions that underlie ideas about stewardship, these same assumptions allow for an environmental attitude with broader appeal both in popular culture and in scholarly analysis. Medieval Christian outlooks share the same humanistic assumptions that are the basis of modern-day stewardship. However, stewardship in modern environmentalist texts is based less upon a notion of humans' inherent superiority and more on preservation. Interestingly, though, preservation is not devoid of humanistic assumptions. Throughout Wilson's text, preservation is predicated upon future generations' benefit, which reinstates humanity as the center of the text. As a result, although modern ideas of stewardship have moved away from religion, some texts can still be located squarely in humanist influence.

However, while no longer explicitly religious, ecological literary texts often involve viewing nature as a semi-divine actor in and of itself. Looking again to Gore's text, one can glean religious overtones, almost as if the environment itself has come to represent a divine or supernatural being—which, not coincidentally, is also one of the offshoots of Gaia in ecological thought. Garrard

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 160.

notes that "[a]scribing organismic unity to the planet and giving it the name of an Earth-goddess allows Gaia to be appropriated as the object of global environmental consciousness, and perhaps veneration too."<sup>66</sup> Gaia seemingly provides a foundation for a more spiritual examination of environmentalism on a global level culturally.

Of course, this is not to say that Gaia is without complications as a theory. For instance, some Ecofeminist critics could find the feminization of the world as derived from a goddess problematic due to possible interpretations of the ecosystem in antifeminist terms (much as postcolonial theorists view the feminization of non-Western peoples problematically). Additionally, some scholars such as Ernest Callenbach object to the perceived spirituality of Gaia on the grounds that "Gaia is not a conscious entity with a purpose or special concern for humans. Those who think of it as a stand-in for a Supreme Being or God are misinformed."<sup>67</sup> These conflicting positions on the place of spirituality in the works of contemporary environmentalist thinkers—authors who see such collaboration fruitful on the one hand, and those who see it as fruitless on the other—provide them ample ground to examine the issue of spirituality in environmentalist texts further; a conversation which could be advanced by the discussion of texts of which the primary frame of reference is religious. By examining these connections in more detail in texts like *Cleanness*, it is possible

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<sup>66</sup> Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 201.

<sup>67</sup> Ernest Callenbach quoted in Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 201.

to further discern the position environmental texts take on religion while simultaneously exploring the as yet mostly undiscovered proto-environmentalist ideas in medieval literature.

The connection between medieval religious and more secular environmental texts is complicated by the vast amount of apocalyptic language in contemporary ecological texts. Environmental apocalypse focuses primarily upon human responsibility—that is, without some divine or supernatural agent of punishment—differs from other rhetorics of apocalypse. In spite of this difference, though, the majority of environmentalist and ecological texts are predicated on the idea of certain irreversible environmental damage if humans do not change their habits of energy consumption and misuse of resources. While this follows the retributive cycle of eschatological thought, present ecocritical readings often replace the divine or supernatural actor with one wholly natural: the earth itself. According to Garrard, the appropriation of eschatological interpretations of the environment precedes twentieth century literature: it is found in the works of poets extending from the Romantic period to the early twentieth century, but is particularly prevalent "in the work of D.H. Lawrence (1885-1930) [where] we find a congruence of environmental themes and

apocalyptic rhetoric."<sup>68</sup> Therefore, although apocalypse is often considered religious, there is a precedent for more secular apocalyptic narrative.

Anxiety about apocalypse is found in many modern environmentalist texts, both literary and non-fictional. Indeed, apocalypse undergirds the entirety of environmental thought. This concern is supported not only by documentaries such as Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*, E.O. Wilson's stewardship manifesto *The Future of Life*, and Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, but also by novels like Smiley's *1000 Acres*, Ozeki's *All Over Creation*, and Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*. Often, the apocalyptic scenes in these texts are mostly devoid of religious terminology (the exception being Wilson's text). However, they all make clear use of destructive themes and anxieties, deliberately invoking anxiety about the eventual end of the world and, possibly, the human species, which is ultimately the most frightening thing about apocalypse. It necessitates thought about life after humans, invoking fears of the ultimate transience of the human species. While this differs from apocalypse in *Cleanness*, which is mostly localized and does not involve the destruction of the entire human race—Noah and his family do, after all, survive the flood—the anxiety felt by the doomed humans in the text is visceral and relatable. They face their own mortality at the hands of nature, as do protagonists in modern environmental apocalypse texts. The central theme

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<sup>68</sup> Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 97.

underlying these texts, both fictional and nonfictional, is the anxiety of environmental failure at the hands of humans.

Many concerns in contemporary environmental science writing can be linked to the overreaching ambitions of humans when it comes to earthly resources. As noted by Garrard, this trend stretches back to Malthus' essays on population growth.<sup>69</sup> However, it can also be seen in more contemporary ecological concerns such as the overproduction of greenhouse gases, overfishing, and extensive logging. In *Silent Spring*, overreaching ambition is tied to the use of chemical insecticides such as DDT, which leads to the destruction of entire ecosystems.<sup>70</sup> Much like Sodom and Gomorrah, the fictional town at the beginning of Carson's text is transformed from a paradisiacal retreat "where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings. . . . Along the roads, laurel, viburnum and alder, great ferns and wildflowers delighted the traveler's eye though much of the year. . . . Then a strange blight crept over the area and everything began to change."<sup>71</sup> Livestock, field, and woodland began to sicken and die, and even human deaths were noted.<sup>72</sup> The land has been changed in seemingly irrevocable ways, transformed from a land of plenty to one of death and decay. Although the change is stated in ecological rather than religious terms,

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 102-103.

<sup>70</sup> Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002),

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 1-2.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 3.

there is no question that what has occurred is an apocalyptic change, at least on a local scale, and that humans are ultimately responsible for that change.

Human responsibility for the degradation of the land has been a lynchpin of environmentalism from the beginning of the movement. Early in *Silent Spring*, Carson writes that "[n]o witchcraft, no enemy action had silenced the rebirth of new life in this stricken world. The people had done it themselves."<sup>73</sup> This is reinforced throughout the entire text, in which Carson details the harmful environmental effects of man-made pesticides such as DDT, emphasizing again the connection between human responsibility and environmental destruction. Carson's text emphasizes Lawrence Buell's assertion that "Apocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal."<sup>74</sup> Indeed, one can trace the roots of apocalypticism even in moments that seem distant from earthly destruction. Contemporary environmental writing is preoccupied with humans' negative impact on the environment, particularly as it is portrayed in cultural output. Even in moments that celebrate the diversity and plenty of the earth, such as the creation of Momoko's seed bank in *All Over Creation* (supposedly a place of potential fecundity and life), there is an undercurrent of fear, particularly the fear that the seeds will be destroyed through lack of maintenance or that the entirety of

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>74</sup> Lawrence Buell, quoted in *Ecocriticism* by Greg Garrard, 101.



Momoko's garden will never be catalogued due to loss through neglect.<sup>75</sup> While these texts deal with apocalypse both directly (in the case of *Silent Spring*) and indirectly (as in *All Over Creation*), their shared concern for environmental destruction at either end of the continuing environmentalist movement, suggest a preoccupation with the destruction of land and humanity's role in it.

Human overreaching is also associated in modern environmentalist novels with human modification of the natural world. In *Oryx and Crake*, the reader is guided through a post-apocalyptic, post-human world by the flawed narrator Snowman, who is partially responsible for the destruction of the world brought about by his sometimes enemy and sometimes friend Crake, a boy genius whose decision to manipulate nature has disastrous consequences. Snowman lives in a world where Crake, who doesn't "believe in Nature . . . with a capital N," helped create a genetically modified virus that decimates human life on earth.<sup>76</sup> During the mass plague that killed off most of humanity, Snowman notes that "[s]treet preachers took to self-flagellation and ranting about the Apocalypse, though they seemed disappointed: where were the trumpets and angels, why hadn't the moon turned to blood?"<sup>77</sup> Here, human manipulation of the non-human results directly in the destruction of the human. Meddling and apocalypse (at least in terms of human nonexistence) merge into one causal entity, irrevocably making humans

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<sup>75</sup> Ruth Ozeki, *All Over Creation* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 356-357, 407-408.

<sup>76</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), 206.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 340-41.

responsible for the destruction of the environment in which they live and, ultimately, themselves.

In environmental literature, as in the episode of Noah's flood in *Cleanness*, there exists concern not merely about the destruction of almost all humanity itself, but also about the aftermath of human decimation. In *Cleanness* and Biblical narrative more generally, this relationship is represented by the chaos of almost all pre-flood life being replaced by Noah, his descendants (the only humans whose actions were admissible enough to be extended salvation), and the animals they saved. However, in environmental texts the world after humans often consists of the earth's survival without that particularly troublesome primate. Popular culture, especially popular culture in Hollywood, has recently been fascinated by post-human earth. Television shows like *Life After People*, books like *The World Without Us*, and films like *After Earth* are all concerned with the post-human in its most literal sense. Texts like these also force us to consider our relationship to the earth as humans. The fact that the land flourishes after the end of humanity indicates an underlying acknowledgement of the harm humans do to the environment.

However, while apocalypse is an underlying theme of ecological rhetoric that does not preclude more hopeful outlooks regarding human and environmental relationships. Environmental destruction is often countered with ideas like stewardship and dwelling that involve limiting human impact on the earth.

Stewardship can essentially be defined as the preservation of natural resources through human use, and is often conceived in anthropocentric terms.

Occasionally, stewardship can be tied to ideas of environmental sustainability, as in Robert Goodland and Herman Daly's article "Environmental Sustainability: Universal and Non-Negotiable." Goodland and Daly's definition of Environmental Sustainability ("ES") clearly illustrates the humanistic foundations of stewardship:

Although ES is needed by humans and originated because of social concerns, ES itself seeks to improve human welfare and [social sustainability] by protecting the sources of raw materials used for human needs and ensuring that the sinks for human wastes are not exceeded, in order to prevent harm to humans. . . . ES means maintaining natural capital, akin to the definition of [Economic Sustainability]. (Robert Goodland and Herman Daly, "Environmental Sustainability: Universal and Non-Negotiable," in *Ecological Applications* 6.4 [1996]: 1003)

Importantly, stewardship's humanistic center can be traced back to the medieval social position of the steward, whose duty it was to oversee the land and ensure the proper output to allow his lord's domain to function.<sup>78</sup> More modern ideas regarding stewardship are also found in texts like Wilson's *The Future of Life*, in which he presents a plan to "not only feed the world now but also . . . raise the standard of living."<sup>79</sup> Wilson's plan considers economic and political solutions in addition to those more traditionally considered ecological: he encourages governments and other political and economic entities to "[m]ake conservation

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<sup>78</sup> Catherine Kelley, "The Noble Steward and Late-Feudal Lordship," in *Huntington Library Quarterly* 49.2 (1986), 134.

<sup>79</sup> E.O. Wilson, *The Future of Life*, 164.

profitable," and to "[u]se biodiversity more effectively to benefit the world economy as a whole."<sup>80</sup> Ultimately, he lays responsibility for stewardship at the feet of three "secular stanchions of civilized existence: government, the private sector, and science and technology."<sup>81</sup> While these modes of stewardship are beneficial, they are limited by their anthropocentric foundations.

The idea of stewardship for human benefit is especially present in *1000 Acres*, which often speaks of the land in terms of something managed by and for humans. This is illustrated especially by Larry's farmer's catechism: "What is a farmer's first duty? To grow more food. What is a farmer's second duty? To buy more land. What are the signs of a good farm? Clean fields, neatly painted buildings, breakfast at six, no debts, no standing water."<sup>82</sup> Clearly, what the veteran farmer describes is related more to manageability than to preservation or tending the land, and differs from Wilson's idea of stewardship. However, when Ginny describes her ancestors' conversion of the land from swamp to arable fields she speaks more in terms of fertility, productivity, and the benefit of the land management; similar terms to those espoused by Wilson. The narrative of her predecessors' hard-scrabble life while making the field arable finally results in the declaration that their modifications "produced prosperity—more bushels per acre

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 162-63.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 164. Interestingly, Wilson's plan most likely restricts this kind of activity to first or second world countries, and is also founded on particularly Western assumptions regarding the environment and governmental participation in its preservation.

<sup>82</sup> Jane Smiley, *1000 Acres* (New York: Ballantine, 1991), 45.

of a better crop, year after year, wet or dry," and Ginny clearly feels that her ancestor's manipulation of the land benefits both her family and the land itself.<sup>83</sup> What this suggests is that a more traditional farming lifestyle in which the land is considered an entity removed from the human and a relationship between the human and the environment is based on the production of crops and the ability to effectively manage land connects to more humanistic definitions of stewardship, definitions which were also in place in medieval England.

However, another frame of interaction between humans and the earth is possible. Dwelling allows for a more inclusive frame of reference regarding human/earth relationships due to its inclusion of non-human entities, which stewardship's largely anthropocentric philosophy generally ignores. Dwelling allows for a less anthropocentric way of thinking about the land by considering the relationship between humans and the land as symbiotic, the ultimate goal of which is "to dwell on the earth in a relation of duty and responsibility."<sup>84</sup> As a result, the relationship between human and non-human becomes one more focused on symbiosis rather than preservation or dependence.

Clearly, both medieval and environmentalist texts are built on the tension between proper and improper treatment of the land and environment. In environmental texts, this relationship is perhaps more clear because it is not mediated by the religious strictures of medieval texts. Texts like *1000 Acres* and

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>84</sup> Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 117.

*All Over Creation* are able to clearly engage in conversations about the supposedly correct way to interact with the land by bypassing religious impositions upon how the land is constructed; although there may be spirituality present in the text, it is a spirituality found in interactions with the land itself rather than with a divine being. However, it is possible to see modern environmentalist conceptions of stewardship reflected in medieval texts. In my next chapter, I hope to expand upon what exactly made stewardship so appealing to medieval English society and how Abraham, a main character in *Cleanness*, fulfills the role of both modern and medieval steward. Although a figure of piety, Abraham could also be interpreted as an option for successfully interacting with the environment in a social context as the overseer of a lord's landholdings. Ultimately, he is portrayed as a figure whose relationship with the land is correct both socially and religiously.

In the most global sense, therefore, medieval and contemporary environmental texts engage with how humans interact with overarching social structures. In the case of ecocriticism and ecological writings, those social structures are often scientific, due to the turn away from the imbrication of religion and the natural world and towards what moderns might consider the proper relationship between the non-humans, humans, and sciences. Medieval texts like *Cleanness* considered religion the utmost social stanchion, with the result that Christian conceptions of nature and human relationships with the non-

human were based largely on religious philosophy. However, underneath the girders of religion it is possible to discern the beginning of sociopolitical considerations of nature and how humans interact with and on the land in order to define their own societal responsibilities more clearly. As disparate medieval and environmentally concerned texts may seem, they are ultimately still texts that all engage with the social fabric of human/non-human interactions, which leads to the creation of sub-genres in larger categories of ecological and medieval texts. Ecological texts' concern with human overreaching and the subsequent responses have led to the sub-genre of secular apocalypse, which still engages in moral, ethical, and political conversations about human responsibility for nearing ecological destruction.

Medieval texts' concerns with destruction ultimately led to poems like *Cleanness*, which could be categorized as penitential literature (literature dealing with the confession and exculpation of sins). In turn, the distinction between sinner and non-sinner is clarified through relationships with nature. This often takes the form of proper land use in the form of stewardship versus misuse of resources, ultimately resulting in the destruction of those who do not treat the environment as they should. As a result, in spite of differences in outlook, both types of texts engage with the question of right human relation to the earth. Ultimately, both medieval and environmental texts are concerned with one of the central questions of scholarly thought: where does the human fit in relation to the

rest of the world? Although one text by no means speaks for the entirety of medieval literature or philosophy, in *Cleanness* the answer to this question is not simply "above." Rather, the question of where humans belong in the world is complexly enmeshed in relationships with the land. Although not an exact exchange, these relationships are reflected in the social structure demonstrated in the text, and also in the ways in which the *Pearl*-Poet engages with the land.



### Chapter 3

#### Land Use and the Non-Human in *Cleanness* and other Medieval Texts

Although the apocalyptic tendencies in *Cleanness* are clear, musings about land use and what constitutes right (in the poet's terms "clean") land use and interactions with the non-human in the material world are, although less obvious, still present. The most obvious example of land use in *Cleanness* is that of Abraham, who takes on the role of a steward, and whose cleanness is partly due to his interactions with his land. In other poems, however, the *Pearl*-Poet is much more overt in his illustrations of land use; *Pearl* in particular, with its workers in the vineyard, displays a "clean" form of human land use. Interestingly, land use and agriculture, as symbols of correct ways of interacting with the natural world, are also present in a number of other medieval texts, especially *Piers Plowman*.

From this, it can be extrapolated that part of the *Pearl*-Poet's fascination with the non-human is reflective of interest in the imbrication of English social order and the natural non-human world. His portrayals of figures like Abraham and the workers in the vineyard intersect in meaningful ways with his portrayals of the land on which they live. While the *Pearl*-Poet was clearly working from hierarchical standards, he was also clearly interested in ways in which the human and non-human world intersected and the results of relationships that troubled or expanded English social boundaries. That he was not the only author to do so, but was joined in this kind of investigation by William Langland and the illustrators

of medieval books of hours additionally indicates an interest in the relationships between human and non-human throughout the various cultural levels of English authors and artists. Although these creators worked within the social hierarchies of the time, they were no less willing, it seems, to think about these hierarchies in productive ways that considered the authority of the non-human in addition to the human.

The boundary between literal land use and figurative ways in which the land is used in *Cleanness* can be somewhat difficult to pin down. Often, the land in the poem is farmed both literally (as with Abraham and his workers) and figuratively (as with Nebuchadnezzar's interaction with the forest and its non-human inhabitants). In this chapter, I examine what constitutes correct land use and non-human/human interactions in Middle English texts in order to demonstrate that concern with how land is manipulated or used by humans and how humans interact with the non-human life upon that land is a longstanding concern in these texts. I also investigate in more detail medieval relationships to the land as revealing more than allegorical meaning; it is also indicative of social and political relationships between humans and non-humans.

Interestingly, the Englishness of the setting is one of the more telling instance of the *Pearl*-Poet's concern with English society. One of the features of the poem is its portrayal of an English countryside rather than a Mediterranean one. The forests, oaks, and fields of the *Pearl*-Poet are features of the English

countryside, which suggests that the land has a role to play beyond merely being the setting in which the poem takes place. Indeed, the *Pearl*-Poet's description of the land differs greatly from the description of Egypt found in the contemporary *Travels of Sir John Mandeville*. While Mandeville describes the land of Egypt as being fruitful in certain locations, the land is still distinctly un-English: he describes the extensive deserts, dry heat, and "long-apples [bananas]."<sup>85</sup> However, while the *Pearl*-Poet does note the heat that Abraham endures, Abraham still sits under an "oke" that is conspicuously "grene."<sup>86</sup> Additionally, when he initially describes the flood, the *Pearl*-Poet states that the animals fleeing the deluge are "Harez, herttez also, . . . / Bukkez, bausenez [badgers] and bulls:" all creatures that the English would have been familiar with.<sup>87</sup> While it is valid to say that the poet's portrayal of an English setting is as much an indication of his ignorance of other parts of the world, I argue that it is also possible that the *Pearl*-Poet's setting is meant to be reflective of English society. Although the poet is pulling his narrative from Biblical sources, the Englishness of the land described suggests a concern with more literal English relationships to the land.

Therefore, before I can examine *Cleanness* in great detail I must first establish what kinds of land use practices in England the *Pearl*-Poet might have

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<sup>85</sup> John Mandeville, *The Travels of John Mandeville*, edited and translated by C.W.R.D. Moseley, (New York: Penguin, 2005), 63-65.

<sup>86</sup> *Cleanness*, in *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, edited by Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007) ll., 602.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 391-92

been familiar with. Medieval farming practices tended to be regionally based and dependent upon the quality of the land for farming, raising livestock, or other agricultural practices. In the West Midlands, the area from which the *Pearl*-copyist's dialect is commonly sourced, the system usually followed a two field rotational system, although more complex divisions of land are noted in extant records.<sup>88</sup> These larger fields could then be parceled out to tenants in smaller amounts of acreage, although that was not always the case.<sup>89</sup> Field crops often consisted of "cereals and legumes," but "[m]ost manors had a garden, usually small and of low value, often used for apple and pear orchards, from which fruit and cider were sold. Small quantities of leeks and other vegetables might be grown, and industrial crops such as flax and hemp."<sup>90</sup> Livestock were often grazed in common fields, although the dimensions and location of common pasturage were not regionally consistent, and animal husbandry of sheep, oxen, and horses was "often subordinate to arable cultivation."<sup>91</sup>

An obstacle in West Midlands farming was the expansive amount of woodlands in the area, particularly in Cheshire and Staffordshire. According to Leonard Cantor, medieval forests in Cheshire were plentiful, although

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<sup>88</sup> Christopher Dyer. "Farming Techniques: West Midlands," *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, Vol. II, Ed. H.E. Hallam (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 369-371, 373-75; Andrew and Waldron, "Introduction," *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2008), 7.

<sup>89</sup> Leonard Cantor, "Forests, Chases, Parks and Warrens," *The English Medieval Landscape* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 63.

<sup>90</sup> Christopher Dyer. "Farming Techniques: West Midlands," 380.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 371-73, 375-77.

deforestation was not uncommon as the medieval period progressed.<sup>92</sup> Often in Cheshire, this deforestation, called assarting, occurred in order to clear more land for agricultural use.<sup>93</sup> The "Dialogue concerning the Exchequer" defined "essarting" as a process that takes place "when any groves or thickets in the forest, which are fit for pasture and for lairs, are cut down; after which same cutting down and tearing up by the roots, the land is dug up and cultivated."<sup>94</sup> Cantor notes that "[b]y about 1334, the area of the royal forests in the county as a whole had shrunk to about two-thirds of what it had been in 1250."<sup>95</sup> The reduction of the forest in order to obtain arable land could be a result of attempts to counteract the famines sweeping the nation in the early fourteenth century, but it also represents an encroachment of the political rights of lords. Relaxing forest law also played a role in the reduction of lords' political clout; as both the forests and their income declined, forest law was enforced less, therefore allowing for greater freedom to non-landed class.<sup>96</sup> Although "the basic administration structure of the forests continued throughout the Middle Ages" and the traditional uses of the forest operated on smaller scales, it was clear that the royal forest and forest law were in decline.<sup>97</sup> While it is not necessarily certain how much the *Pearl*-Poet

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<sup>92</sup> Cantor, "Forests, Chases, Parks and Warrens," 65.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>94</sup> "Dialogue concerning the Exchequer," in *Select Historical Documents of the Middle Ages*, translated and edited by Ernest F. Henderson. (New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1965), 74.

<sup>95</sup> Cantor, "Forests, Chases, Parks and Warrens," 66.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 66-67.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 67-69.

knew about medieval agricultural practices (he seems to know less than Langland about farming, although *Piers Plowman* is far more reliant upon allegorical readings of medieval farming practices), it is likely that he was at least cognizant of land use in a literary sense, as evidenced by his portrayal of Abraham as a symbol of stewardship in *Cleanness* and his portrayal of the Workers in the Vineyard parable in *Pearl*.

In *Cleanness*, Abraham's role parallels that of a medieval steward, who oversees the work done on the land by his lord's tenant farmers. Indeed, at one point in the text the narrator notes, "As sewer in a god assyse he serued Hem fayre," thereby directly relating Abraham to the role of the steward serving his lord.<sup>98</sup> Abraham's role as steward is also implied by his actions and surroundings in the text: when he is introduced, he is not actively working the fields, but is resting under an oak tree.<sup>99</sup> He is also wealthy enough to have both servants and a separate dwelling for his livestock, which further implies that he is at the very least a wealthy farmer. These indicators of social rank indicate that, as Spearing notes, "the poet's main interest in the narrative was not. . . for its theological significance, but for its literal significance as a human and social document."<sup>100</sup> By paying such strict attention to the literal social position of Abraham in his text—a medieval steward or wealthy farmer—rather than his more well-known

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<sup>98</sup> *Cleanness* l. 639. "As a steward he served the fair ones in a good manner."

<sup>99</sup> *Cleanness* ll. 600

<sup>100</sup> A.C. Spearing, *The Gawain-Poet: A Critical Study* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1970) 58.

religious position as the father of all of God's children (although this is by no means an incorrect interpretation of Abraham), the *Pearl*-Poet invests him with literal significance, and allows for the examination of the text as a literal representation of medieval social structures in addition to an allegorically significant work.

However, the most convincing evidence of Abraham's steward role is found in the *Pearl*-Poet's greatest source text, the Bible. In Genesis 12:16, Abraham and Sarah are rewarded for Sarah's role as the Pharaoh's concubine with "sheep and oxen, and he-asses, and men-servants and maid-servants, and she-asses, and camels."<sup>101</sup> After their departure from Egypt with Lot, who was also animal-wealthy, the two men and their families travel to a place between Bethel and Hai, where they discover that because "their substance was great . . . [and] they could not dwell together. Whereupon also there arose a strife between the herdsmen of [Abraham] and Lot. . . . [Abraham] therefore said to Lot: 'Let there be no quarrel, I beseech thee, between me and thee, and between my herdsmen and thy herdsmen.'"<sup>102</sup> From these verses, it is clear the Abraham had both the resources and the manpower to fulfill the economic role necessary for a steward. He would be able to monitor and supervise the general land use of his holdings, therefore directly affecting the impact of his farming practices upon the land.

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<sup>101</sup> Genesis 12:16, *Douay-Rheims, The Holy Bible*. New Hampshire: Loreto Publications, 2004.

<sup>102</sup> Genesis 13:1-8, *Douay-Rheims*.

While Abraham's role as steward would seem to give him control over the land his laborers work, his social position complicates his relationship to the land by separating him from direct labor on it. This suggests that social hierarchy could be dependent on distance from the land rather than connection to it through labor; rather, the laborers mediate a good steward's relationship with the land. This results in a somewhat paradoxical relationship in which stewardship and care of the land is simultaneously promoted by stewards but is not directly practiced by them, once again relegating the land to a lesser hierarchical position even as it acknowledges that care for the land is necessary. This is similar to what Rudd notices in her examination of medieval relationships with the earth. She contends, "it is possible to find places where the world around us is seen as being no less important than us, yet also resistant to being absorbed into our general outlook."<sup>103</sup> This is the case with the land Abraham works in *Cleanness*: without it he would be unable to sustain himself as a husbandman, but the land is no less subordinate to him because it is necessary to his survival. One can still discern the sense of dominion over the land that was an integral part of medieval human/non-human land relationships.

However, Abraham's role as a steward also immediately brings to mind ideas about stewardship in an anthropocentrically centered caretaking sense. This idea is furthered by the natural imagery surrounding Abraham's introduction. He

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<sup>103</sup> Rudd, *Greenery*, 36.



is introduced as sitting "byfore his hous-dore, vnder an oke grene; / Bryt  
blykked þe bem of þe brode heuen; / In þe hye hete þerof Abraham bidez: / He  
was schunt to þe schadow vnder schyre leuez."<sup>104</sup> Given that Abraham's role as  
steward is to tend and maintain the land and oversee those who work it, the  
fecundity of the green oak and the fair leaves can somehow be traced back to  
his—or, more precisely, his laborers'—work. It is also clear that Abraham relies  
upon the land to shield him from the heat of the noontime sun. The relationship  
between Abraham and the land then becomes a symbiotic one in which both  
partied benefit: the tree flourishes, and Abraham can rest beneath its shade.  
Ultimately, though, one can conclude that the tree has been nourished for  
Abraham's benefit; in order for him to have a cool place to rest in the heat of the  
day outside of his home, he would need to tend the land and the tree.

However, there is little doubt that Abraham is anything but a decent land  
manager, especially as evidenced by the abundance of food provided to his divine  
guests. Importantly, Abraham's show of hospitality, which is directly connected to  
the fecundity of his land, is given to be the paragon of cleanliness. This is most  
supported by Abraham's provision of butter, which would have been a product  
mostly confined to the upper classes in the late fourteenth century, and the  
slaughter of a young fat calf, which suggests a surplus of young, healthy, and

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<sup>104</sup> *Cleanness* ll. 600-605. "before the door of his house under a green oak. The beam of the great sun shone bright. In the great heat Abraham sits there: he was moved aside to the shadow under the fair leaves."

well-fed livestock—something that would have been unavailable to those of the lower classes, who may have had one or two cows upon which they relied for milk and other dairy products.<sup>105</sup> Interestingly, Joan Thirsk notes in *Alternative Agriculture: A History From the Black Death to the Present Day* that after the first significant plague in the mid-fourteenth century "cattle-keeping" among wealthier landowners underwent a period of growth, partly due to a series of "bad seasons [that] caused so many sheep losses" that cattle farming (and the raising of livestock in general) began to rise.<sup>106</sup> Due to the fact that the only named foodstuffs (aside from the vaguely termed bread and pottage) are butter and a "tender and not to□e" calf, and because the manuscript's earliest possible date of composition is around the mid-fourteenth century, one could surmise that Abraham reflects the growing number of wealthy farmers moving away from cereal-based farming in post-plague England.<sup>107</sup> The flourishing of Abraham's farm also indicates that his relationship with the land is correct. His land is productive enough to supply him with the necessary ingredients of pottage: at the very least some kind of cereal or grain such as barley or oats, with vegetables and possibly tougher cuts of meat or organs to supplement the stew.<sup>108</sup> Such food

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<sup>105</sup> Joan Thirsk, *Food in Early Modern England: Phases, Fads, Fashions 1500-1760* (New York: Hambledon Continuum, 2006), 4; *Cleanness* ll. 629-36

<sup>106</sup> Joan Thirsk, *Alternative Agriculture*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 8.

<sup>107</sup> *Cleanness* ll. 629-30, 636.

<sup>108</sup> D.J. Stone, "The Consumption of Field Crops," *Food in Medieval England*, eds C.M. Woolgar, D. Serjeantson, and T. Waldron, 13, 21. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); J. Birrell, "Procuring, Preparing, and Serving Venison." *Food in Medieval England*, eds C.M. Woolgar, D.

would have been common throughout medieval England, although it is likely that ingredients would improve in quality and taste parallel to social order. However, when coupled with the evidence of butter, it is clear that Abraham's farm is perhaps more productive than others. Additionally, the famous interlude in which the angels promise Sarah and Abraham a child speaks to the potential productivity of Abraham himself as well.<sup>109</sup> In turn, this implies that Abraham's relationship with the land is appropriate—an argument I will elucidate further in comparison to the citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah in my next chapter.

Abraham's label as a good land manager is reflected in the land around him; it flourishes under his tenure, and becomes a manifestation of a less fraught relationship between human and non-human. In one of the clearest instances of Abraham's land use in the text, he is shown to be enjoying the almost pastoral scene around him: the oak tree is shading him from the blazing midday sun and "He watz schunt to þe schadow vnder schyre leuez."<sup>110</sup> It is this last line, which translates loosely as "He was moved to the side in the shadow under the fair leaves," carries the greatest implication that this particular human/non-human interaction is a positive one. From this line, it is apparent that the tree is the reason Abraham is able to endure the heat because of the material existence of that particular tree in that specific location.

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Serjeantson, and T. Waldron, 184. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). Ingredients could also have been supplemented by foraging.

<sup>109</sup> *Cleanness*, ll. 648-652.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 604.

Abraham's being shaded by "schyre leuez" mirrors the bower God created for Jonah in *Patience*.<sup>111</sup> In both cases, the leaves shield the men from the heat of the day; however, whether or not the plants remain to shield the men from the sun is entirely dependent upon the men's actions.<sup>112</sup> Jonah lolls about underneath his leafy bower, napping and wasting the day in leisure; as a result, God removes the sheltering branches and leaves him to burn in the sun.<sup>113</sup> Abraham, who immediately rises and greets his guests with the greatest hospitality, is rewarded by his tree remaining solidly in place.<sup>114</sup> Nature then becomes reflective of anthropocentric concerns in both poems, although Abraham is clearly preferred over Jonah. While these different tales do entail different moral overtones—obedience or deference to the presence of divinity being preferable to dismissive laziness—they also indicate slightly different relationships with the land on a social level; namely, that social rectitude is rewarded with land, in this case in the form of vegetal shelter. One must note that in both Jonah and Abraham's cases the social moral is anthropocentric, and the land and trees merely become devices by which one can discern reward for right actions. Focusing on the reward given to humans effectively strips the non-human of any agency; it becomes mere literary chattel. However, Kathleen Palti notes about the contrastive relationship exhibited

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<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 605

<sup>112</sup> *Patience*, in *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, edited by Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007), ll. 443-56; *Cleanness* l. 605.

<sup>113</sup> *Patience* ll. 457-80.

<sup>114</sup> *Cleanness* ll., 610-42

by Abraham and Jonah, "Abraham lives well because his household is permeable . . . . He does not set himself in opposition to God and the world, unlike Jonah, who experiences the world as something that challenges and resists him, so in seeking escape he experiences confinement."<sup>115</sup> Extrapolating upon Palti's idea that the men either relate widely (and therefore positively) or in a limited manner (and therefore negatively) with the land, one could surmise that the relative size of the plant—an oak tree in Abraham's case and a small confining bower in Jonah's—is reflective of their relationship to the land as expressed by their actions: the larger the vegetation the better relationship with the land.

An Abrahamic relationship with the land is also countered by another portrayal of land use in the *Pearl*-Poet's works. In *Pearl*, the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard places the laborers in authority over the land, a representation of anthropocentric stewardship over the land rather than dwelling within it. In the parable, the lord needs men to harvest his crop, and goes to the market three times throughout the day, each time hiring men who had been passed over by other employers.<sup>116</sup> At the end of the workday, all of the laborers are to be paid an equal amount, which irks those who had been working throughout the day.<sup>117</sup> They ask the lord for more than the agreed upon penny's recompense, and

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<sup>115</sup> Kathleen Palti, "The Bound Earth in *Patience* and Other Middle English Poetry," in *ISLE* 20.1 (2013). 46.

<sup>116</sup> *Pearl*, in *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, edited by Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007), ll. 505-40.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 541-56.

are rebuffed by him; the lord replies that because they had agreed upon a penny's wages the laborers would get a penny.<sup>118</sup> The parable culminates with Christ likening the penny to salvation: those who come to Christ either early or late in life will be saved.<sup>119</sup> In this case, the land is considered less a direct producer of life than a producer of life by proxy; as hired outside laborers the men live off of the money they earn from working the land rather than living off of the land itself. They are clearly less concerned about their extended recursive relationship with the land, which they would show more concern for if they dwelled upon the land, than they are about earning their pay. Their relationship to the land is uniform: they are all more concerned with pay than with the land they work.

The idea of a uniform relationship with the land is also found in medieval books of hours, which, although demonstrative of the idea that different seasons necessarily entail a different relationship with the land, are usually quite unchanging in their depictions of that relationship. According to Bridget Ann Henisch, author of *The Medieval Calendar Year*, medieval calendars—including books of hours, which also often contained religious material in addition to the monthly Georgian and zodiacal calendars—generally contained a "cycle of labors," in which "each season [had] its own special character and concerns."<sup>120</sup> Usually, the cycle followed the agricultural process throughout the year; "always

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., ll. 561-64.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., ll. 569-72

<sup>120</sup> Kathleen Henisch, *The Medieval Calendar Year* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 2.

at the core there was the round of activity on the land."<sup>121</sup> Interestingly, although books of hours could also contain religious material, examination of the monthly illustrations of labors indicated that they were mostly secular, with "no obvious religious overtones."<sup>122</sup> Due to the relatively secular nature of the illustrations and their interconnectedness with agricultural activities, these illustrations provide an especially fruitful insight into the medieval material relationship with the land.

In Jean, Duke of Berry's *Très Riches Heures* and *Belles Heures*, this relationship is most notable in the illustrations for the months of March, June, July, August, September, October, and November. Often, the illustrations of the laborers correspond from manuscript to manuscript. Both texts show laborers, often in front of castles,<sup>123</sup> pruning or tilling vines in March, mowing in June, harvesting wheat in July and threshing it in August, harvesting and stamping grapes in September, sowing new crops in October, and swineherds feeding their pigs in November.<sup>124</sup> All of these illustrations show the laborers engaged in

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>123</sup> Although the editors' notes do indicate that the illustrations often depicted many of the Duke's personal landholdings and places of residence, the illustrators have drawn strikingly similar castles in the background of the majority of the illustrations. In each of the illustrations except for February and December, the castles all look strikingly similar: many have white walls with blue roofs and large steeples. These two months may differ simply because they depict activities far from the castle. February's illustration is a wintertime portrayal of a laborer's home, complete with sheep shelter, what appears to be either a silo or a smokehouse, and apiary. December, on the other hand, depicts a hunt with many different castles in the background.

<sup>124</sup> *The Belles Heures of Jean, Duke of Berry*, Edited by Millard Meiss and Elizabeth H. Beaton (New York: George Braziller, 1974), f. 4, 7-12; *The Tres Riches Heures of Jean, Duke of Berry*, Edited by Jean Longnon, Raymond Cazelles, and Millard Meiss. Translated by Victoria Benedict (New York: George Braziller, 1969), f. 3v, 6v-11v. Although the illustrations in *The Belles Heures* are much less detailed, it is clear that the activities are still the same.

intense work, and during the summer months depict the heated working conditions by drawing the laborers with fewer clothes on.<sup>125</sup> There is no doubt that the workers are engaged with the land; however, in these illustrations the land is often a backdrop for the agriculture the laborers do. These illustrations differs from portrayals of agricultural labor in texts like *Piers Plowman*, in which the land carries significance beyond its usability. Rather, in books of hours, although the laborers are clearly materially invested in the land, the land serves mostly as manipulated object.

Yet the material relationship between human and land seems to be reserved in the books of hours for those who interact directly with the land; the lords and ladies depicted in the *Très Riches Heures* illustrations are often literally above such work, indicating a removed relationship from agricultural land. The nobles are often depicted in courtly settings; when they are pictured in the country they are on horseback or in a highly cultivated garden.<sup>126</sup> Even when they are pictured in the same illustration with laborers, as in August, they are separated from the agricultural land by both distance and a river.<sup>127</sup> Although they are depicted as being on the land, they are not interacting with it. In illustrations, the limitations of a "vast but circumscribed habitat" become even more clear: the simultaneous representation of the distance between laborer and lord and the

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<sup>125</sup> *The Belles Heures*, f. 4, 7-12; *The Très Riches Heures*, f. 3v, 6v-11v.

<sup>126</sup> *Très Riches Heures* f. 2r, 4v, 5v.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 8v.



boundaries of the illustrations suggest the very finitude and inescapability that Palti observes in Middle English texts like *Cleanness*.<sup>128</sup> Importantly, in both texts nobles are both removed from the land and restricted by it.

Similarly, in *Cleanness* scenes involving Sodom and Gomorrah the characters' relationship with the land is more removed as a result of the actions of the characters who live in cities. This distance from nature most evident by the description of pre-apocalypse Sodom as "an erde of erþe þe swettest, / As aparaunt to paradys, þat plantted þe Dry□ten; / Nov is hit plunged in a pit like of pich fylled."<sup>129</sup> This description does two important things: it brings to mind visions of Eden, in which the human was given command over the land and animals, while simultaneously demonstrating the vast distance between Sodom and that idealized garden. As Jonathan A. Glenn argues in "Dislocation of Kynde in the Middle English *Cleanness*," "the real uncleanness of Sodom lies in its departure from the kynde given man by God," which, in this case, could be said to extend as far back as Adam and Eve.<sup>130</sup> In this case, something considered socially wrong is manifested in a removed relationship from nature. Because they no longer behave in a manner worthy of paradise, the poem implies, they are denied a more full relationship with the land.

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<sup>128</sup> Palti, "The Bound Earth," 32.

<sup>129</sup> *Cleanness* ll. 1006-8

<sup>130</sup> Jonathan A. Glenn, "The Dislocation of Kynde in the Middle English *Cleanness*," in *The Chaucer Review* 18.1 (1983), 87.

In this way, it becomes apparent that medieval relationships with the land are also based upon existing socio-political structures, with the result that those who work the land directly or oversee that work maintain a more genial relationship than those who do not. This becomes clearer upon consideration of Abraham as opposed to the citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham, whose relationship to nature is more established, is considered one of the "clean" textual figures: he is clearly a good land manager and a man of faith. However, the citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah, whose city is now far removed from the laborious cycle of agricultural life led by Abraham and whose actions move further from spiritual purity, have such a poor relationship with the land that they are eventually destroyed by it. Agricultural life and a closer connection with the land could therefore be considered in a more positive light.

However, as demonstrated by the Workers in the Vineyard in *Pearl*, a close relationship between agriculture and the land is not always the case. In that segment, the relationship of the worker to the land is constrained by the economic relationship of work and pay. Being bound by rules of work and pay demonstrates that the medieval relationship with the land was complexly enmeshed with existing social structures. Indeed, in his analysis of *Pearl*, A.C. Spearing argues that "[a]lthough the story is a parable, . . . it already possesses in the Gospel a fairly fully realized material setting and human content. It is a vivid and concrete story of everyday life, . . . applicable to the agricultural society of fourteenth-

century England."<sup>131</sup> In his analysis of the laborers who advocate for more pay because they have worked longer hours, Spearing argues that the "speech of discontent seems to catch the authentic note of the fourteenth-century equivalent of the trade-unionist: the journey protesting, let us say, against an over-strict interpretation of the Statute of Laborers."<sup>132</sup> Although the land in this parable clearly has allegorical significance, it equally demonstrates social significance, and a somewhat destabilizing significance at that: it is the means by which laborers make their living, in this case helping those who were unable to labor earlier in addition to those who may have been more proactive. However, it is also clear that the land is still worked by and for humans; the land matters more as a means to an economic end than it is a thing that matters in and of itself.

In contrast to both *Cleanness* and *Pearl* is *Piers Plowman*, in which the land itself becomes an integral character. The plowing of the half-acre takes on material significance in addition to the allegorical significance usually assigned to the text. Early in the C-Text, Piers announces that "[His] plouh-pote shal be [his] pyk-staff and pyche a-to the rotes / And helpe my coltur to kerue and clanse the forwes."<sup>133</sup> Later, the plowing process is described in more detail: "Now is Perkyn and this pilgrimes to the plouh faren; / To erien this half-aker holpen hym monye.

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<sup>131</sup> Spearing, *The Gawain Poet*, 101.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>133</sup> William Langland, "The Ploughing of the Half-Acre," *Piers Plowman: A New Annotated Edition of the C-text*, edited by Derek Pearsall (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2008). ll. 64-65.

/ Dikares and deluares digged vp the balkes."<sup>134</sup> As Pearsall notes in an explanatory footnote, Piers and the "villagers go to work as a community on the common field."<sup>135</sup> Although there are similarities between this episode in *Piers Plowman* and the workers in the vineyard parable in *Pearl*, *Piers Plowman* is more detailed about the actual work done by the laborers. Langland emphasizes the materials and practices of farming in fourteenth century England, resulting in a passage in which the materiality of the land is much more present than in the *Pearl*-Poet's text. By focusing upon the material reality of farming, there is a greater connection to the literal farming of the land, and, as such, an increased focus upon interaction with the land. In this case, land use is both allegorical and material, indicating that medieval conceptions of the land and of farming practices had both actual material benefits—like the production of food and jobs—in addition to less physically embodied conceptions of society.

It is important to note that although the land in the *Pearl*-Poet's work (as well as the texts of other medieval authors) is treated as partially allegorical, the land is also authoritative: those who have material relationships with the land learn from it. This is the case in *Cleanness*' description of Nebuchadnezzar's exile from court; the land becomes an entity capable of imparting wisdom in ways that the human world cannot. After having the temerity to declare himself "god of þe

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., ll. 112-14.

<sup>135</sup> Pearsall, Derek ed., *Piers Plowman: A New Annotated Edition of the C-text* (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2008). 161, n.112.

grounde," he is banished from the realm of men and must "in wasturne walk and wyth þe wylde dowelle, / As best, byte on þe bent of braken and erbes, / With wroþe wolfes to won and with wylde asses."<sup>136</sup> Although it is important to note that this passage places non-human animals below men—it is a punishment for Nebuchadnezzar to be cast from the world of men—later in the text the non-human animals is the means by which Nebuchadnezzar returns to humanity. For seven years, he moved further from the human to the non-human: he began to walk on all fours, eat grass off of the ground, and his hair and beard tangled and formed one large matted mass that reached the ground.<sup>137</sup> After God thinks he has suffered enough to learn from his previous experiences, he "wayned him hys wyt, . . . / Pat he com to knowlach and kenned hymeluen."<sup>138</sup> In "Feudal Relations and Reason in Cleanness," Cindy L. Vitto contends that "God punishes [Nedbuchadnezzar] by taking away what made him human—his reason."<sup>139</sup> Vitto's statement corresponds to the hierarchical order medievalists would have followed, which Karl Steel explained as being tied in to human's dominance over the non-human through reason: "humans recall their domination of animals and find in this domination a guarantee of human rationality and immortality."<sup>140</sup> For the overwhelming majority of medieval texts, according to Steel, "[a]nimal

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<sup>136</sup> *Cleanness* ll. 1672-76.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 1681-94.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 1701-02.

<sup>139</sup> Cindy L. Vitto, "Feudal Relations in Cleanness," in *The Rusted Hauberk: Feudal Ideals of Order and Their Decline*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994).

<sup>140</sup> Karl Steel, *How to Make a Human* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2011), 33.

ignorance delivers them to human domination while protecting humans from being dominated in turn by animals."<sup>141</sup> However, in *Cleanness* that domination undergoes a subtle transformation: Nebuchadnezzar, in becoming like the non-human animals, could potentially be dominated. However, this does not occur. Rather, from having his reason taken from him and then restored to him, he learns from his experience of animalization. While this still assumes an oppositional relationship between the human and non-human, it is clear that, through the temporary revocation of his humanity, Nebuchadnezzar is able to learn from the non-human creatures around him.

However, it is clear that although Nebuchadnezzar learns from the land, that lesson is not imparted to future generations, nor is non-human authority of particular interest to other actors in the Belshazzar portion of the text. In fact, their ignorance of Nebuchadnezzar's experience is one of the reasons they are later destroyed; unlike the previous ruler, Belshazzar does not heed warnings about intemperate pride. Rather, through Belshazzar desecrates the Temple vessels, which are themselves an interesting mixture of nature and divine. The Temple vessels are described as beautiful works of art: some of the vessels are formed in the shapes of castles, complete with battlements and banners. Additionally, there were vessels covered in "braunches and leues / Pyes and papejays . . . / As þay prudly hade piked of pomgarnades; / For alle þe blomes of þe bo□es war

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 33.

blyknande perles, / And alle þe fruyt in þo formes of flaumbeande gemmes."<sup>142</sup>

However, rather than use them for their holy purpose, Belshazzar allows his mistresses and soldiers to drink from them at a raucous feast.<sup>143</sup> Belshazzar's desecration of the temple vessels upholds hierarchical norms in which the non-human is valued below the human; indeed, in this case the devaluation seems to be twofold. The vessels are desecrated in order to demonstrate Belshazzar's dominance over both conquered people and the non-human.

Of course, it is possible that, much like the untranslatable writing on the wall, it is humans' inability or unwillingness to admit non-human value that contributes to the decimation of Belshazzar and his court. Indeed, it is the desecration of the Temple vessels that causes the disembodied and fateful hand to appear and scrawl the writing on the wall. In this case, it is irrevocably shown that things matter: were these items not mistreated, it is possible that destruction would not have been visited upon the entire court. However, because Belshazzar disregarded the value of the temple vessels, he contributed to the erasure of an entire court, from those of the lowest social order to the highest. These particular things do matter—and they matter all the more because of their role as both religious relics and objects capable of asserting the power given them as religious relics. In this case, if the temple vessels were not temple vessels, it is unclear if they would cause such tremendous change to the humans that misused them.

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<sup>142</sup> *Cleanness* ll. 1456-68.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 1507-20.

However, because they play such an integral role in the narrative chain of events, it is clear that they do matter, and that, in this case, they outrank the humans who misuse them. This indicates a social order outside of the anthropocentric social order so often presented by the *Pearl*-Poet, whether he was aware of it or not.

The dispersion of animals in *Cleanness*, which occurs immediately after the God's new covenant with humanity that he will never again destroy the world, similarly indicates that although all non-human animals may be under human dominion, they still have what constitutes a social order on outside of the human. This not only suggests a divine form of stewardship, in which the human is the animal looked after by God, but also implies that because God will never destroy the world again it is humanity's job to care for it. After the flood, the narrator states that

Perwyth He blessez vch a best, and byta□t him þis erþe.  
Pen watz a skylly skyualde [a wise dispersal] quen scaped alle þe  
wylde,  
Vche fowle to the fly□t þat fyþerez my□t serue,  
Vche fysch to þe flod þat fynne coupe nayte,  
Vche beste to þe bent þat bytes on erbez;  
Wyld wormez to her won wryþez in þe erþe,  
Þe fox and þe folmarde to þe fryth wyndez,  
Herttes to hy□e heþe, harez to gorstez,  
And lyounez and lebardez to þe lake-ryftez;  
Hernez and haukez to þe hy□e rochez,  
Þe hole-foted fowle to þe flod hy□ez,  
And vche best at a brayde þer hym best lykez;  
Þe fowre frekez of þe fold fongez þe empyre. (ll. 528-540)



Each creature is given its own area of dominion in a non-human hierarchy that seems separate from the human hierarchy. Unlike the creation scenes, it is God, and not Man, who orders the animals. While this still indicates a lack of non-human animal autonomy, that humans are bypassed in favor of direct divine dispensation could suggest hesitancy with regard to humans' ability to properly order or care for non-human inhabitants. Such a concern would have been especially pertinent when one considers the possibility that Adam and Eve's banishment from Paradise could have reflected negatively upon their ability to care for the animals as they were supposed to.

Interestingly, this passage of *Cleanness* differs from Noah's story in Genesis in important ways: namely in the ordering of non-human animals by God and the absence of the scene giving humans dominion over the animals. While the *Pearl-Poet* focuses upon the hierarchical dispersion of animals to their respective places, Biblical narrative focuses more upon Noah's authority over the creatures. In Genesis 9, God tells Noah that he should "let the fear and dread of you be upon all the beasts of the earth, and upon all the fowls of the air, and all that move upon the earth: all the fishes of the sea are delivered into your hand. And every thing that moveth and liveth shall be meat for you: even as the green herbs have I delivered them all to you."<sup>144</sup> As the non-human animals disembark the ark and go forth, they are referred to only in general terms, not the extensive and detailed

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<sup>144</sup> Genesis 9:2-3, *Douay-Rheims*.

list provided by the *Pearl*-Poet.<sup>145</sup> The *Pearl*-Poet's increased emphasis upon order rather than domination (although domination of non-human animals is implicit in the hierarchization of them) indicates an interest in natural order as much as a desire for human dominance over the non-human, which, given the clear indication of human superiority in the poet's Biblical source, demonstrates curiosity about the natural world outside of human domination. The absence of explicit domination over the non-human, particularly in the visceral sense that everything edible on the land is subject to be killed for human sustenance, separates *Cleanness* from traditional conceptions of natural hierarchy.

While the interactions between human and non-human have so far been relatively productive, it is also important to consider ways in which the non-human and the human interact with regards to destruction. As much as the *Pearl*-Poet considers questions about land use and non-human/human exchange, he was also greatly interested in what happens when those relationships go wrong. Apocalypse is arguably one of the main themes of *Cleanness*, and is interestingly even more indicative of the material agency of the non-human than the poet's musings about land use. Although it is clear that he wants to consider the ways thing matter in relation to the established social mores of the time, the agency the land obtains in the apocalyptic sections of *Cleanness* show what happens when those things become actors in their own right. Land use and apocalypse therefore

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<sup>145</sup> Genesis 8-9., *Douay-Rheims*.

become two sides of the same coin: on one side, the land is considered to be something that, if treated well is, is productive; on the other, the land becomes a destructive force if established social hierarchies are not followed.

## Chapter 4

### Fruit of the Poison Sea: Apocalypse in *Cleanness*

Although apocalypse often connotes worldwide destruction, in the Middle English poem *Cleanness* apocalypse usually involves more local disasters: while Noah's flood obliterates the entire world, the apocalyptic annihilation of both Sodom and Gomorrah and Belshazzar's court are confined to those two specific locales. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, as well as the description of the Dead Sea that follows, has often been treated through the critical lens of religious allegory. A.C. Spearing examines *Cleanness* as a collection of medieval exempla, although he does note that the complexity of the poem's structure and the author's digression indicate intent to do more than merely provide a lesson. Jonathan A. Glenn investigates kynde in *Cleanness* as it relates to obedience to God. Additionally, Charlotte Morse, in her consideration of judgment in *Cleanness*, considers apocalypse through a Christian lens.

However, by focusing my analysis upon more secular causes and effects of apocalypse—such as the reasons for Abraham's privileging over the Sodomites, the earth's integral role in the implementation of the apocalyptic scene, the literal obliteration of an entire city and court deemed unclean, and the creation of land that reflects the society that once inhabited it—I will demonstrate that the poem, while obviously religious, also offers a secondary layer of commentary upon the

social mores of medieval English society. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and the creation of the Dead Sea are somewhat divorced from religious context due to the increasing physical absence of God, the Creator who has contrived the destruction of the town and its people. Rather, the destruction of the city is rerouted through the rather more worldly medium of the earth itself: it is the land that visits destruction upon the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, and it is the land that is shown to be irreversibly changed as a result of human actions upon it. In this chapter, I examine *Cleanness* in order to consider the land's role in the destruction of human society—including two cities, a court, and virtually all of the citizens of both places—in order to further elucidate the significance of the land's role in determining and demonstrating medieval social relationships. Although I focus upon the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and the resulting creation of the Dead Sea, I would be remiss not to discuss the most obvious instance of theocentric apocalypse: Noah's flood. I also examine non-human responsibility for several odd happenings involving non-humans, such as the expulsion of Jonah from his escape ship and the razing and massacre of Belshazzar's court, in order to argue that the *Pearl-Poet* is concerned with examining interactions between human and non-human within the theocentric center of medieval society.

Apocalypse expands upon what Greg Garrard notes in *Ecocriticism*: a concern, found historically and presently in both religious and secular thought,

"that the end of the world is imminent."<sup>146</sup> Additionally, the "dialectic in which apocalypticism both responds to and produces 'crisis'" is essential in the "evaluation of it as an ecocritical trope."<sup>147</sup> In other words, the context of apocalypse and the way those textual apocalypses are produced must be considered. Charles B. Strozier notes that both religious and secular apocalypse are linked by a concern with the end of the world as well as a shared hope for a new beginning after the world is purged of its human inhabitants.<sup>148</sup> Medieval people would have been aware of Biblical apocalypse in the very least, so concern about the end of the world could, in fact, have been one of the motivations behind the *Pearl*-Poet's consideration of apocalyptic Biblical texts.

In fact, one could speculate that scenes of apocalypse were very much on the mind of the English poet. Contemporary to the earlier estimated dates of the poems' composition in the mid-fourteenth century, the Black Death was sweeping through not only England, but all of Europe. Although not so clearly connected to the plague as other late medieval texts such as Boccaccio's *Decameron* or Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*, it is not unreasonable to argue for a connection between the reality of the plague and the *Pearl*-Poet's work, particularly *Cleanness*. The plague moved swiftly, and was extremely deadly. Colin Platt, for example, cites the fifteenth century Henry Knighton, who chronicled the plague:

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<sup>146</sup> Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 93.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>148</sup> Charles B. Strozier, "Apocalypse," in the *Encyclopedia of Psychology and Religion*, eds. David A. Leeming, Kathryn Madden, and Stanton Marlan (New York: Springer, 2010), 63-64.

the most lamentable plague penetrated the coast of Southampton and came to Bristol, and virtually the whole town was wiped out. It was as if sudden death had marked them down beforehand, for few lay sick for more than two or three days, or even for half a day. Cruel death took just two days to burst out all over the town. At [Knighton's own] Leicester, in the little parish of St Leonard, more than 380 died; in the parish of Holy Cross more than 400; in the parish of St Margaret 700; and a great multitude in every parish. (Knighton in *King Death*, ed Colin Platt, 5)

Such mass death must have seemed very much like the end of the world, especially given the geographical range of the disease.<sup>149</sup> Eventually, the plague claimed anywhere from approximately one-third to one-half of the English population.<sup>150</sup> According to a short reading of *Pearl* based entirely upon textual evidence of the *Pearl* maiden's affliction with the plague, J.P Freide and Ian J. Kirby argue for a biographical interpretation of the text in which they postulate that the maiden who died was actually the *Pearl*-Poet's young daughter.<sup>151</sup> If such a speculative argument is true, then the *Pearl*-Poet could have had a personal connection as well as a cultural connection to the massive death tolls of the Black Death. The association of the plague with divine punishment is additionally unsurprising and well-documented; Boccaccio writes that "[s]ome say . . . that it descended upon the human race through the influence of the heavenly bodies, others that it was a punishment signifying God's righteous anger at our iniquitous

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<sup>149</sup> Henry Knighton, in *King Death: The Black Death and its Aftermath in Late Medieval England*, edited by Colin Platt (Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 5.

<sup>150</sup> Colin Platt, *King Death: The Black Death and its Aftermath in Late Medieval England*, (Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 9.

<sup>151</sup> Freide, J. P., and Ian J. Kirby. "The life, death, and life of the Pearl-Maiden ('Pearl')," in *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 103.4 (2002): 395-398.

way of life."<sup>152</sup> Additionally, according to Faye Marie Getz, the Four Horseman of Revelation often framed medieval understanding of the Black Death.<sup>153</sup> Therefore, there was clearly a cultural connection to the plague through religious understandings of the Apocalypse.

This is especially the case in the first exemplum in *Cleanness*: Noah's flood. The poem's narrative generally follows the Biblical narrative closely, and Andrew and Waldron note that while, "the poet expands the biblical narrative and adds some extra touches, which contribute to the liveliness of the passage and help to define the feelings and motives of God and Noah, he does not alter the essential facts."<sup>154</sup> In fact, this exemplum is the least altered: in the subsequent two exemplum extensive scenes are added or expanded upon in ways that change the meaning of the text in not insignificant ways. The tale of the Flood and the subsequent Covenant therefore retains the closest resemblance to its textual source, indicating what could be a closer cultural relationship to the narrative.

However, the Covenant between God and humans and the resultant hope for a new world is not the only significant event in the exemplum. The sea itself is given power over the human, resulting in its material agency. According to Gillian Rudd, "seas at some level defy order and control . . . the sea is not

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<sup>152</sup> Boccaccio, quoted in *King Death*, 1.

<sup>153</sup> Faye Marie Getz, "Black Death and the Silver Lining: Meaning, Continuity, and Revolutionary Change in Histories of Medieval Plague," in *Journal of the History of Biology* 24.2 (1991), 267.

<sup>154</sup> Andrew and Waldon, in *Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, p. 124.



governed by any human figure."<sup>155</sup> That is especially the case with the worldwide post-flood sea. After the flood destroys all life not lodged in the Ark, "Vche hille watz þer hidde with yþez [waves] ful graye."<sup>156</sup> Furthermore, the flood does not fully abate for an extended period of time: after God commands the deluge to cease it takes one-hundred and fifty days for the peaks of mountains to become visible, and it is not until the New Year that Noah and his family can exit the Ark.<sup>157</sup> Until the waters subside, Noah and his family are bound to the ark, which illustrates Palti's argument that "the Flood has just demonstrated how easily a global dwelling place can become a trap from which there is no escape since there is no accessible place outside of it, and thus the men's 'empyre' [over the non-human] is precarious."<sup>158</sup> In circumscribing Man's influence, even if only for a period of time, the sea becomes a place of power.

Apocalypse in *Cleanness* is indubitably reliant upon tenets of Christianity: all of the stories are biblical, and all involve some kind of interaction with otherworldly figures. However, later in the poem the divine Creator himself rarely makes a physical appearance: in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah the only divine actors are angels. God's wrath in this scene is not, however, visited through these divine beings; rather, it is meted out through the land itself. In the last exemplum, the massacre of Belshazzar's court, the desecration of the temple

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<sup>155</sup> Gillian Rudd, *Greenery*, 150.

<sup>156</sup> *Cleanness*, l. 430.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 442-451, 493-496.

<sup>158</sup> Palti, "The Bound Earth," 33.

vessels begins the sequence of events leading to the court's ultimate demise, even though the destruction is ultimately carried out by human hands. This gives the non-human in these episodes agency that seems somewhat unusual in medieval texts, and I intend to investigate the implications of this agency further, particularly through the lens of ecocriticism. Although Garrard also notes that secular apocalypse emerged primarily around the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, I argue that the apocalypse of Sodom and Gomorrah is more secular due to the absence of a spiritual figure of wrath during the actual destruction of the cities.

The explanation for destroying Sodom and Gomorrah emphasizes the complex positioning of God within the text. Although God is clearly the instigator of the crisis, he later vanishes from the scene. God's absence in the poem contrasts the active role in his destruction of the city in the Bible, which directly references God as the destroyer of the cities.<sup>159</sup> In the entirety of the *Pearl*-Poet's description of the aftermath of the apocalypse that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, there is no mention of the Creator: from the point where he begins to describe the black bubbling lake until his description of the ashy apples, the poet does not blame the changed land upon God, but upon the land itself.<sup>160</sup> This corresponds to the determinist philosophy that "heavenly bodies" were "interposed between God and

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<sup>159</sup> Genesis 19:29, *Douay-Rheims*. "Now when God destroyed the cities of that country, remembering Abraham he delivered Lot out of the destruction of the cities wherein he had dwelt."

<sup>160</sup> *Cleanness*, ll. 1013-48.

the universe, effectively" removing God from his position of omnipotence and omniscience.<sup>161</sup> The author of *Cleanness* does not go so far as to remove God completely from the equation: the idea that the apocalypse was divinely ordained underwrites the entire destruction sequence in the first exempla of Noah's flood. Rather, God's initial instigation makes his physical absence later in the scene more pronounced. This, in turn, causes a greater awareness of the land's role in the apocalyptic vision. I contend that the purpose of removing the divine creator from the descriptions of the destruction and the aftermath was to emphasize the ultimately human cause of the earth's destruction. While apocalypse in *Cleanness* is generally portrayed in more traditional religious overtones, this view disregards the fact that the land and the non-human more generally are what visit revenge upon its inhabitants: God, the supposed instigator of destruction, appears less often as the poem progresses. In both cases, mankind and the land he inhabits must undergo transformation in order to save or improve the world.

Of course, I must also address the diversity of medieval Christianity in order to fully consider the apocalyptic ramifications of the text. Clearly the milieu in which *Cleanness* was written was highly Christian. Therefore, the world is likely to be hierarchized in Christian terms with the divine above the human and the human above the non-human. However, the medieval period was also marked by what Gordon Leff describes as "an attempt to explain the natural world in

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<sup>161</sup> Gordon Leff, *Dissolution of the Medieval Outlook*, (New York: New York University Press, 1976), 28.

natural terms."<sup>162</sup> This involved "the investigation of natural phenomena in physical, mathematical, and logical, as opposed to metaphysical terms."<sup>163</sup> In 1277 members of the Paris university were condemned for proposing the then radical determinist philosophy that God could "be conceived only as a remote, i.e., indirect first cause . . . with power over the world exercised by the heavenly spheres . . . . Man in turn was dependent upon the latter, not God."<sup>164</sup> Therefore, although most thought was predicated upon a Christian base, that base was not homogenous. In fact, those determinist ideas are subtly expressed in the scene of destruction surrounding Sodom and Gomorrah. While these Christian bases were anthropocentric, a connection did exist between humans and the land that valued the land as an entity in and of itself.

However, since the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah acts as foil to the cleanness exhibited by Abraham, it first is necessary to discuss what, exactly, made Abraham clean. For the most part, Abraham's cleanness stems from his religious piety and hospitality towards God: he alone in the episode offers to wash the Lord's feet and feed him.<sup>165</sup> Abraham clearly acknowledges God's authority and acts accordingly. His cleanness, therefore, is a cleanness of spirit. Abraham then proceeds to provide his guest with cakes and pottage, and also orders a calf

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>165</sup> *Cleanness* II. 617-20.

slaughtered and boiled.<sup>166</sup> Repeatedly, Abraham is said to have acted "þryftyly" or "in a god assyse," even "[w]yth a sadde samblaunt and swete."<sup>167</sup> Spearing notes that this section of the text has "significance as a human and social document."<sup>168</sup> The poet "seizes on [these hospitable details], and he draws them out and weaves them together to form a thoroughly realistic presentation of an event."<sup>169</sup> In this feasting scene, Abraham enacts social ideals of charity and hospitality. This indicates that his cleanness is also tied to social situations: because he gives proper hospitality and deference to God through washing his feet and feeding him, Abraham enacts paradigms of cleanness.

His purity also stems from his relationship with his wife. Presumably because he follows God's natural law that only "a male and his make" should procreate, Abraham's cleanness is also bodily, unlike the Sodomites, who are physically unclean because they "fylter folyly in fere on femmales wyse."<sup>170</sup> Therefore, as Glenn argues, Abraham belongs "to the lineage of cleanness that obediently conform[s] to the nature given them by God, thus conforming to God's sovereign will."<sup>171</sup> Abraham's cleanness and adherence to natural law result in the continuation of his family line. Additionally, as Morse rightly argues, through the figure of Abraham, who acts as a paragon of cleanliness, "the *Cleanness* poet

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid., ll. 625-32.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., ll. 635-40.

<sup>168</sup> A.C. Spearing, *The Gawain Poet*, 58.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>170</sup> *Cleanness*, l. 696.

<sup>171</sup> Jonathan A. Glenn, "Dislocation of *Kynde* in the Middle English *Cleanness*," 79.

makes it clear that natural human marriage is the way back to paradise under the natural law, or, to be more precise, that it offers a way, under the law of nature, to approach paradise."<sup>172</sup> In other words, the spiritual and moral cleanness of Abraham is one one that all Christians should strive towards. His twofold cleanness also immediately separates him from the Sodomites and helps us see the impetus behind their destruction: because they are not clean as Abraham is clean, they will be destroyed.

In fact, punishment for perceived social deviance is a ironically fruitful reading of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The apocalypse begins with a storm of fire and brimstone, which "rosted and brenned" the cities.<sup>173</sup> Then, the earth splits open, ensuring that "alle þe regioun torof in riftes ful grete, / And clouen alle in lyttel cloutes þe clyffez aywhere . . . . Al the citees and her sydes sunkken to helle."<sup>174</sup> The region is so thoroughly razed that "no□t saued was bot Segor, þat sat on a lawe."<sup>175</sup> Both Sodom and Gomorrah are utterly destroyed, and buried under filth. The apocalypse in Sodom and Gomorrah aligns with what Stephen O'Leary has termed a "tragic apocalypse," which "conceives of evil in terms of guilt; its mechanism of redemption is victimage, its plot moves

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<sup>172</sup> Charlotte C. Morse, *The Pattern of Judgment in the Queste and Cleanness* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1978), 166.

<sup>173</sup> *Cleanness*, l. 959.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 961-68.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 992

inexorably toward sacrifice and the 'cult of the kill.'"<sup>176</sup> One of the purposes of the annihilation of Sodom and Gomorrah could therefore be to demonstrate the unfortunate fate of those who act outside of acceptable social norms. It can then be surmised that *Cleanness* operates as much on a social level as it does on a religious and allegorical level.

Indeed, even before this apocalypse begins, one can discern in the text admonitions to follow a proscribed social code. In his article "The Disclosure of Sodomy in *Cleanness*," Allen J. Frantzen argues that "the discussion of sodomy in *Cleanness* must be seen in the context of the poem's clerical audience, whose cleanness included proper exercise of the office of confession. For the poem engages a strategy that recalls the clergy's surveillance of the faithful and of their conduct."<sup>177</sup> He also notes that the task of hearing confession was confused by restrictions upon the clergy and a general confusion of the category of sexual sins.<sup>178</sup> Since the detection and definition of sodomy was so tangled, is it possible that one purpose of the Sodom and Gomorrah episode is to clarify that issue? If so, then the destruction of Sodom could serve to indicate what priests, and possibly society in general, should think about those who commit acts of sodomy. This is supported by Morse, who maintains that

the poet's admonitions to his audience [ . . . ] are intended to make his listeners apply the stories to themselves. As the focus of God's

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<sup>176</sup> Stephen O'Leary, quoted in *Ecocriticism* by Greg Garrard, 95.

<sup>177</sup> Allen J. Frantzen, "The Disclosure of Sodomy in *Cleanness*," in *PMLA* 111.3 (1996), 452.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 452.

judgment narrows, the audience is invited to recognize that eventually it will fall upon each one of them, and each member of the audience is encouraged to judge himself according God's criterion. (*Patterns of Judgment* 159)

*Cleanness* therefore becomes a text of both social and religious significance.

Clearly the unacceptable behavior here, and the one which God intends to punish, is the prevalence of same-sex relationships among men.<sup>179</sup> In her essay "Gender and Sexual Transgression," Jane Gilbert defines the relationships in Sodom as both endogamous and exogamous: that is, as both somewhat incestuous ("too-similar") in the Sodomites' desire for each other, and somewhat foreign ("too-different") in the Sodomites' desire for the angelic beings.<sup>180</sup> The vitriolic responses to these desires indicate that the practices of the Sodomites were disapproved of on both a religious and a social level. As a result, the actions of the citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah take on added significance. Aside from demonstrating disregard for religious tenets, they also dangerously destabilize social order by inverting traditional sexual roles. This results in their literally being consumed by the earth and wiped off of the land, implying that divergence from the social norm is harmful not only to the individuals who are different, but the place in which they live as well.

In addition to the societal of the Sodom and Gomorrah episode, the apocalypse could be the land's response to the actions of the Sodomites. Before

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<sup>179</sup> *Cleanness*. 694-95.

<sup>180</sup> Jane Gilbert, "Gender and Sexual Transgression," in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet* (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 1997), 55-56.



the local apocalypse, the Sodomites threaten the angels and Lot, crying out such disgusting filth that "þe wynd and þe weder and þe world stynkes / Of the brych þat vpbraydez þose broþelych wordez."<sup>181</sup> As Morse notes, the Sodomites "have polluted the land with their filth, and the destruction visited upon Sodom makes the place seem what it is, a devastated land . . . . This storm, with its rushing wind and foul rain, should be read as God's response to the stinking vomit cast up by the Sodomites."<sup>182</sup> While I agree with the general gist of Morse's analysis, I disagree with her point of origin. God appears only conceptually or referentially in the destruction scene after he "begynnez on lofte / To waken wederes so wyldre,": the earth itself carries out the literal destruction.<sup>183</sup> Instead, since the Sodomites polluted the land with their words, I contend that the earth itself is the entity responsible for the destruction. It is the land that opens up and swallows the cities, and it is the land that carries the Sodomites' foulness even after their destruction. In fact, Earl G. Schreiber notes that this is a theme present throughout the text: in each different narrative in the poem "the wicked societies literally fall into horrible punishment [. . .] Sodom and Gomorrah [are] 'sunken to helle.'"<sup>184</sup> After the divine instigator leaves, the land acts in its best interest to cleanse itself.

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<sup>181</sup> *Cleanness*, ll. 848-49.

<sup>182</sup> Morse, *The Pattern of Judgment in the Queste and Cleanness*, 170.

<sup>183</sup> *Cleanness*, ll. 948-68.

<sup>184</sup> Earl G. Schreiber, "The Structures of *Cleanness*," in *The Alliterative Tradition in the 14th Century* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1981), 143.

The land takes on agency in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Part of this agency stems from personification: the land is given human qualities in order to carry out the apocalypse. The winds are described in the third person plural, and are said to have "wrestled together;" clouds also "clustered" between thunderclouds, and, most spectacularly, Hell threw open its gates in order to swallow the cities.<sup>185</sup> The earth here takes on an active role, visiting vengeance upon the men who had polluted it with their sin. It is the first indication in the segment that the earth is an actor in its own right, and as a result an important indicator of the status of the land in medieval thought. Up until the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the land is static: traveled across and manipulated by God, Abraham, the angels, and later Lot and his family. During the destruction, however, the land is transformed into a figure that acts upon others, almost as if the land has a threshold of tolerance regarding how it is used or manipulated. As a result, the land's agency is indicative of the limits the earth can be pushed to before things start going awry. The apocalypse is the land's reaction to the actions of humans, and as such gives the land agency.

The creation of the Dead Sea is the strongest indicator of both the land's reaction to the citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah and that some medieval authors already had an idea of man's ability to effect the land upon in which he lived, even

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<sup>185</sup> *Cleanness*, ll. 949-63.

after humans had been removed from the area. The Dead Sea is described like a cesspit:

. . . . þe derk Dede See hit is demed euermore,  
For hit dedez of deþe duren þere □et;  
For it is brod and boþemlez, and bitter as þe galle,  
And no□t may lenge in þat lake þat any lyf berez,  
.....  
And þer waletz of þat water in waxlokes grete  
þe spoumande aspaltoun þat spyserez sellen;  
And suche is alle þe soyle by þat se halues,  
þat fel fetes þe flesch and festres bones. (ll. 1020-40).

The land has been transformed from a place of human habitation to a post-apocalyptic nightmare, and harkens towards one of the plagues in Revelation (literally called "The Apocalypse" in the Douay-Rheims bible) in which an angel "poured out his vial on the sea" and "there came blood as it were of a dead man: and every living soul died in the sea."<sup>186</sup> However, unlike the apocalypse in Revelation, the apocalypse in *Cleanness* does not end with the coming of a new and better world, but with a scene of destruction, once again emphasizing its position as a tragic apocalypse. In *Cleanness*, this destruction seems rather final, for both the humans who inhabited Sodom and Gomorrah and the land surrounding the cities. In her essay Palti contends, "A global dwelling place can become a trap from which there is no escape since there is no accessible place outside it."<sup>187</sup> In other words, humans are bound to the earth and cannot move beyond its realms. Indeed, there is no existence outside of the physical world in

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<sup>186</sup> The Apocalypse 16:3, *Douay-Rheims, The Holy Bible*.

<sup>187</sup> Kathleen Palti, "The Bound Earth in *Patience* Other Middle English Poetry," 33.

which humans live, and as such there is no way to escape the consequences of their actions. In this case, the consequences are the destruction of an entire region of land and the creation of the Dead Sea.

The creation of the Dead Sea could be taken to indicate that the poet realized that the land itself responds to the actions of those who live upon it. Two somewhat contradictory readings result from that: firstly, that the land is merely a vessel for anthropocentric metaphoricity, or secondly, that the land's creation of this nightmarish area is a cry for humans to recognize that what they do effects the land. While both readings have their merits—the first allows for readings of the text that examine important social concerns and the dissemination and practice of medieval Christianity—I argue for the validity of the second. As a result of the polluting actions of the Sodomites and the land's subsequent transformation into the lifeless area of the Dead Sea, that land is no longer livable for either humans or non-humans. The land where the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah once stood has been replaced by a sea where there is no life fit for human use, and the reader is led to believe that such life will not soon return to the region.<sup>188</sup> The Sodomites have metaphorically poured salt on the earth, and, as a result, have prevented the land from realizing its full potential. Underlying the creation of the Dead Sea is the idea of human responsibility: if the Sodomites had not behaved as they did, the land could possibly still be fruitful and productive.

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<sup>188</sup> *Cleanness*, ll. 1015-21.

While this transformation could be read as anthropocentric—in that the land reflects the human filth that used to live on it—I argue that it allows the *Pearl*-Poet to express the importance of treating the land with respect. This is especially the case when the poet describes the transformation of the land where Sodom was after the city was destroyed. According to the poet, Sodom

. . . euer hade ben an erde of erþe þe swettest,  
As aparaunt to paradys, þat plantted þe Dry□ten;  
Nov is hit plunged in a pit like of pich fylled.  
.....  
Pis watz a uengaunce violent þat voyded þise places,  
Pat foundered hatz so fayr a folk and þe folde sonkken. (ll. 1006-14)

While the worker of this vengeance was presumably intended to be read as God, if one continues to understand the land in the poem as an actor in its own right it then becomes possible to read the act of vengeance as the earth's rather than God's. Additionally, this short passage indicates what could be an originary point for awareness of the land. Buried under the religious connotations is the idea that humans are responsible for what happens to the earth upon which they live. While this awareness was not new—after all, since the agricultural revolution, and even prior, humans have been aware that they could manipulate the land—the land itself was undergoing drastic changes. Logging (also a major concern for modern environmentalists) was transforming wooded area into farmland, and medieval landowners recognized that "it was dangerous to cut down too many trees when timber was used almost exclusively for fuel and extensively for building and

when the woods and waste lands were needed for the pasturing of cattle and sheep."<sup>189</sup> Such recognition could have led to a greater awareness of the dangers of mistreating the land, thereby resulting in the repudiation of a people, like the Sodomites, who did not treat the land with respect. By destroying a people who work against nature, the poet is able to highlight the importance of considering the land as more than merely a means to a more productive end.

One particularly interesting instance of the earth marking the effect humans have upon it occurs when the poet describes the apples surrounding the Dead Sea. The passage immediately follows the description of the newly created Dead Sea, and explains that the apples are

As orenge and oþer fryt and apple-garnade,  
Also red and so ripe and rychely hwed  
As any dom my□t deuce of dayntygez oute;  
Bot quen hit is brused oþer broken, oþer byten in twynne,  
No worldez goud hit wythinne, bot wyndowande askes. (ll. 1044-48)

In the textual notes to *Cleanness*, Andrew and Waldron state that the description highlights "the contrast between the apples' beautiful outer appearance and the bitterness of their inner substance: thus they are made a telling symbol of the false seeming of sin."<sup>190</sup> However, the apples could also represent the status of the land: once beautiful, it is now reduced to ashes—which are themselves a symbol of the

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<sup>189</sup> May McKisack, *The Fourteenth Century: 1307-1399*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 313.

<sup>190</sup> Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, editors' notes in *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, 155.

effects of destruction. This indicates a concern on the part of the poet for the consequences of human actions upon the land.

However, the apples are not the only natural anomaly in the Dead Sea: the ocean's ability to bend the laws of nature sets it apart as a non-human other, which ensures that the region is doubly polluted by both the people upon it and its reputation as a place where the laws of nature do not apply. The reader is told that in the Dead Sea that a lump of lead set on the surface will float, a feather will sink, and that wherever the water touches the land plants do not grow. The most marvelous quality of the body of water, though, is that

If any schalke to be schent wer schowued þerinee,  
Ða□ he bode in þat boþem broþely a monyth,  
He most ay lyue in þat lo□e in losying euermore,  
And neuer dry□e no dethe to dayes of ende. (ll 1029-32)

The Dead Sea's departure from kynde unsettles the reader, and, as a result of its otherworldly actions, becomes something that the reader desires to separate him- or-herself from. Indeed, its otherness becomes something good Christians can learn from: the poet instructs the reader to take the Dead Sea as an example of the effects of wickedness (ll. 1048-49).<sup>191</sup> The land has been imposed upon and negatively defined by humans twice: the first time by the citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the second time by the poet's separation of it from the rest of the world. Indeed, the land itself could be considered a colonized figure within the text whose identity is determined from without. Although the land attempts to

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<sup>191</sup> *Cleanness*, l. 1025-28.

exert agency through the apocalyptic changes it brings about at Sodom and Gomorrah, it is still silenced by human definitions of non-human entities.

However, the Dead Sea's ability to preserve life complements its effects on the surrounding area. The Sea can bring both extend life and precipitate death, which effectively gives it divine power. The Dead Sea becomes the deterministic "heavenly bod[y]" that appropriates God's powers.<sup>192</sup> It becomes a material purgatory in the physical world rather than a conceptual purgatory in the spiritual world: after all, the humans in the lake are kept alive until the Second Coming of Christ.<sup>193</sup> Ironically, though, even this preservation of life is, in its turn, a half-death. The people in the Dead Sea do not exit it—they are kept in limbo. The preservation of humans in an undead or nonliving state complements the state of the surrounding area. Like the Dead Sea, the land does not produce what might be considered true life—at least in the sense that life is positively productive—instead producing apples with ashes in the middle and great disgusting wax-like curls of asphalt.<sup>194</sup> The Dead Sea perpetuates both life and death, and acts as a non-human judge of what will exist and what will not. It controls the land around itself, and as such, acts agentially in spite of its otherness.

Although the agency of the Dead Sea stems from its power over life and death, its agency is limited both by its own borders and its dependence upon the

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<sup>192</sup> Gordon Leff, *The Dissolution of the Medieval Outlook*, 29.

<sup>193</sup> *Cleanness*, ll. 1031-32.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 1038, 1044-48.



human. It is important to note that the very shores its salty waters kill contain the agential Dead Sea. Its power to act is circumscribed by land, which, whether or not it provides life, is still the realm of the human once the boundaries of the destroyed cities are passed. Unlike the massive ocean created by the Flood earlier in the poem, the Dead Sea is limited by its size. Additionally, its power is limited by the actions of humans: the only way it can retain a human in limbo is if "any schalke to be schente wer scowued þerinne."<sup>195</sup> Its status as a deterministic power is still reliant upon human (mis)deeds. Ultimately, the poet still sees the Dead Sea as a tool for teaching rather than a figure of destabilizing agency.

Conversely, the sea in *Patience* does support Rudd's contention that seas are outside of human control; in *Patience* the sea is controlled by God, which once again complicates readings of the sea as agential by constraining it within hierarchical religious structures. At first, the sea is seen as a place of protection: Jonah, fleeing God's command to go preach to the Ninevites, secures passage on a ship to Tarce to escape the divine mission.<sup>196</sup> However, his attempts at evasion are unsuccessful. God tracks him to the ship in the middle of his journey, and then brings down a storm that leads to Jonah's expulsion from the ship in an attempt to mitigate the wrath of the divine storm.<sup>197</sup> After he is evicted from the ship, the

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<sup>195</sup> *Cleanness*, l. 1029.

<sup>196</sup> *Patience*, ll. 75-88.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 135-23.

storm ceases immediately.<sup>198</sup> Although the sea is, in this case, clearly controlled by the non-human, the non-human who controls it also constrains its agency. The sea is not an actor in its own right, but is once again constrained by medieval religious social structure.

Interestingly, "things matter" more in the apocalyptic scenes of destruction in *Cleanness* than in agricultural scenes of production: as a result, non-human agency becomes dangerous and destructive. Karl Steel notes that the medieval human is often constructed oppositionally by the non-human, which often relegates the non-human to negative roles.<sup>199</sup> In this case, even as the land is acknowledged as an actor in its own right, it is simultaneously gelded by implications that non-human agency is still dominated by the human. This phenomenon is particularly the case in apocalyptic scenes in *Cleanness*, which results in a conception of the non-human that is still reliant upon medieval hierarchies of humans exerting greater authority than non-humans.

This point is made explicit when God justifies his destruction of the city. After delineating the preferred way of conducting a sexual relationship, God tells Abraham that

Now haf þay skyfted My skyl and scorned natwre,  
And henttez hem in hepyng an vsage vnclene.  
Hem to smyte for þat smod smartly I þenk,  
þat wyþes schal be by hem war, worlde withouten ende. (ll. 709-  
12)

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid., l. 231.

<sup>199</sup> Karl Steel, *How To Make a Human: Animals and Violence in the Middle Ages*, 14 and 35.

The Sodomites have abandoned kynde, and as such must serve as an example to others.<sup>200</sup> According to Glenn, the Sodomites' "departure from the kynde given man by God" is the "real uncleanness" of the episode.<sup>201</sup> However, this segment of justification has been added by the poet of *Cleanness*: as noted by Andrew and Waldon in their notes to the text, the scene in which God explains his wrathful plans regarding the Sodomites is not present in the original Biblical text.<sup>202</sup> Indeed, in the *Douay-Rheims* translation, the story moves from the meal beneath the tree directly into Abraham's bargaining with the lord to spare the city: the exchange regarding the laws of kynde—both good and bad—are absent.<sup>203</sup> This point suggests that the author of the text connected what he considered unnaturalness with uncleanness, and a rather static view of what is considered natural. The fact that the poet felt it necessary to further justify the Sodomites' destruction indicates that concern surrounding the sin of unkyndeness was particularly prevalent in medieval society. Importantly, it also indicates that medieval thinkers were engaged with questions about nature and what was natural: concerns that can then be extrapolated to the non-human world in which medievals lived. In fact, concern with the non-human reaches its apex in the in the last exemplum, at Belshazzar's court.

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<sup>200</sup> Interestingly, this is a direct contrast to God in *Patience*, who gives the Ninevites a reprieve from destruction in spite of their sins.

<sup>201</sup> Jonathan A Glenn, "Dislocation of *Kynde* in the Middle English *Cleanness*, 87.

<sup>202</sup> Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Wallace, editors' notes in *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, 141.

<sup>203</sup> Genesis 18, *Douay-Rheims*.

In this exemplum, the divine acts through an unusual mediator: the temple vessels. This imbues the vessels with power beyond that of the courtly chalices; that their abuse instigates the chain of events leading to the eventual decimation of Belshazzar's court demonstrates a direct connection between material use of objects and consequences of that use. Much like the hoards Jane Bennet discusses in "Powers of the Hoard," the hoarded temple vessels are enlivened neither by pathetic fallacy nor prosopopeia; rather, they are themselves invested with "thing power as the ability to remind us to mind the limits of human knowing."<sup>204</sup> In Belshazzar's case, the limit of his knowledge is such that it prevents him from fully comprehending the powerful agency of the temple vessels. Additionally, by investing these non-human objects power to influence later events, the *Pearl-Poet* indicates concern about the supposedly right or clean way to treat objects that are considered holy. While this necessarily means that objects not considered holy automatically have less agency or authority in their own right, therefore once again perpetuating the pro-religious social hierarchization the *Pearl-Poet* so likes, the extension of such significance to a non-human object indicates a concern with use of the non-human by humans.

Additionally, the temple vessels are themselves a representation of productive or positive relationships with the nonhuman. The cups are covered in

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<sup>204</sup> Jane Bennet, "Powers of the Hoard," in *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral* edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Washington, DC: Oliphaunt Books, 2012), n. 5 page 240, n. 9 page 243.

graven images of fruit and birds, and covered with gems.<sup>205</sup> Likewise, an ornately carved candlestick had "Braunches bredande þeron, and bryddes þer seten / Of mony koynt kyndes, of fele kyn hues, / As þay with wynges vpon wynde had waged her fyþeres."<sup>206</sup> While Spearing argues that it is "unfortunate" that "[t]he poet has found no method other than the usual medieval descriptio to emphasize the importance of the sacred vessels . . . because they are his central symbol of purity," I find the poet's extensive description of the vessels intriguing on a literal level, especially since it is their desecration is the first in a sequence of events that leads to the massacre of Belshazzar and his court.<sup>207</sup> That the holy vessels are decorated with highly detailed depictions of animals and plants indicates a connection between the non-human and purity; that their desecration begins the chain of events that leads to the decimation of an entire people demonstrates that violating such non-human purity is a serious crime. As a result, the poet once again emphasizes the importance of respecting the power of non-human objects even as they are depicted in the traditional religious hierarchy of the Middle Ages.

*Cleanness* demonstrates that although the *Pearl*-Poet was largely supportive of the existing medieval social structure that centered in religious beliefs, he was also curious about what might be "clean" with regard to ecological and non-human entities. As David Wallace notes in "*Cleanness* and the Terms of

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<sup>205</sup> *Cleanness*, ll.1458-1466.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 1482-1484

<sup>207</sup> Spearing, *The Gawain Poet*, 64.

Terror," the Pearl-Poet "shares the modernist enterprise of representing God 'down here.'<sup>208</sup> Although Wallace goes on to state that the poet is particularly "engaging with human subjects and evolving a covenant with mankind," and although his contention that the *Pearl*-Poet's "enterprise" is "modernist," which gives rise to issues of periodization, I still consider the underlying thrust of the position—that the *Pearl*-Poet was interested in thinking about things that modern day theorists are also interested in thinking about—to be sound and worthy of further investigation.<sup>209</sup> However, I would counter Wallace's statement by contending that the *Pearl*-Poet engages with non-human subjects in addition to human ones, and that his consideration of the *Pearl*-Poet as being "modernist" for doing so is incorrect. Rather, I would agree with Latour's assessment that "we have never been modern," specifically as evidenced by the continuity between a fourteenth century poet and a portion of a growing school of twenty-first century thought. Both the *Pearl*-Poet and some ecocritics are engaging with similar questions of what it means to relate to the non-human. If that makes the *Pearl*-Poet think in a modern way, then it could be equally valid to say that some ecocritics can think mediievally.

Of course, the awareness of relationships with the land in medieval texts must still be explored before any certain conclusions can be reached. One would

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<sup>208</sup> David Wallace, "Cleanness and the Terms of Terror," in *Text and Matter: New Critical Perspectives of the Pearl-Poet*, edited by Robert S. Blanch, Miriam Youngerman Miller, and Julian N. Wasserman (Troy: The Whitson Publishing Co, 1991), 96.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, 96

have to examine not only the significant amount of land-related material in *Cleanness*, but would also have to examine that text within the larger conversation in the *Pearl*-Poet's works. Such work, however, would pay dividends in furthering our understanding of both medieval thoughts about the land and modern environmental thought. Additionally, examining texts not traditionally considered for ecocritical readings, like those of the *Pearl*-Poet, would allow for a greater understanding of what it means to be and exist with the land. Reflecting upon medieval considerations of the land could allow modern scholars and environmentalists to better understand the thought processes that allowed for the environmental exploitation that is reaching greater proportions in the modern era, which could eventually provide a greater understanding of what solutions need to be provided. In this case, the old adage holds true: only in learning from the past can we circumvent similar catastrophes in the future.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

The complex relationship of generation and destruction in *Cleanness* bring to light new possibilities and interpretations of medieval ideas about the land. Although clearly conceived along hierarchical lines, the relationship between humans and non-humans in medieval literature are not linear, but complex enmeshments of what it means to dwell upon the earth and how the land should be treated. Additionally, while ecocritical theory and medieval literature do not agree on all points, it is evident that combining the two can provide new and fruitful readings that further our understanding of how medieval people interacted with the land and how that interaction was reflected in existing social order. These conclusions contribute to the growing ecocritical conversation surrounding medieval literature. While they may not be applicable to all texts, they provide another avenue for medieval ecocritics to explore.

Interestingly, there seems to be a divide between land use and apocalypse with regards to non-human agency. Literary ideas about land use tend to center more upon ideas of stewardship, which necessarily entails that the non-human is often subordinate. Apocalypse, on the other hand, often calls upon the non-human in more agential roles, resulting in a loss of control over the non-human. Interestingly, the discord between the two ideas of land indicates that the non-



human is more agential in roles of destruction than roles of creation. Such a divide could indicate two things.

Firstly, it could indicate that land management or the ability to manage the land renders it less dangerous because it can be controlled. Often, the land that is managed is, in the case of *Cleanness*, *Piers Plowman*, and even medieval books of hours often depict farms or fields. This land is clearly under human control: it plays an important role in the production of food, and is the means by which stewards and farmers can glean both their living and their social standing. On the other hand, land that is involved in apocalypse—such as the sea during Noah's flood or the land that rises up to swallow Sodom and Gomorrah—is out of human control. It has not been effectively managed, as has the land on farms, and is therefore more agential and dangerous.

Secondly, it again demonstrates the strict hierarchization present in medieval society. That farmland is consistently manageable but unfarmed land is not relegates each role to a particular situation: land used for production or land involved in destruction. It is clear that the land Abraham farms is productive rather than destructive, and the poet is also explicitly clear about the fact that the land surrounding Sodom and Gomorrah was made destructive because of the actions of the townspeople. Each kind of land is imbued with a particular unchanging meaning throughout the exemplum in which it appears. The land is therefore relegated to a clear role in both the narrative of the story and its

underlying social structures. Indeed, the portrayal of farmland as generative and unfarmed land as destructive is immediately recognizable as anthropocentric: it is the land that humans control that is less dangerous to him. As a result, the non-human is once again relegated to the given medieval social hierarchy, becoming less a thing that matters and more a thing that is manipulated.

However, this does not mean that all non-humans in medieval literature are similarly manipulated or powerless, which would be interesting to investigate in future. My thesis was limited by both author and genre: I examined only the works of one poet, and the poem I examined is clearly concerned with religious, rather than secular, material. It would be interesting to think about poetry less overtly religious and more social in tone, such as *The Romance of the Rose*. Such a reading of the text would not only provide an additionally well-rounded reading regarding social structure, but would also allow for the expansion of the analysis of land use to gardens, which was not possible with *Cleanness*. It would be particularly useful to draw upon the existing extensive scholarship about medieval gardens and their connection to the nobility as well as their larger role in dream visions. An investigation into the use literal gardens of nobles' palaces in comparison with the use and purpose of dream gardens could bring about fruitful readings of how these gardens were deployed in medieval literature and society. Thinking about how other texts expand upon land use (or the destruction of land),

would enable critics to have a better understanding of the relationship between human and non-human in medieval literature generally.

Furthermore, looking for human/non-human relationships in other medieval texts would allow for a better understanding of my reading of *Cleanness* by discovering if the complex position held by the *Pearl*-Poet is unique to his texts or if interest in land use and apocalypse could be found in other texts. Determining whether or not the way the *Pearl*-Poet was alone or one among many in his consideration of non-human agency (or lack thereof) within existing social structures would lead to a more well-rounded view of society and the non-human's place in that society in medieval England.

In turn, it could also lead to a greater understanding of the development of human/non-human relationships throughout English history: an important consideration in a nation whose history with the land is, like *Cleanness*, complex. In some regions, like the Lake District, the relationship with the land has in recent decades come to emphasize conservation and productive relationships that involve preserving older traditions less reliant upon modern habits of energy consumption in order to preserve a landscape that is considered distinctly English. Ultimately, developing critical understanding of the medieval relationship to land could hopefully allow for a better world in the future.

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