Iowa State University

From the SelectedWorks of Jeremy Withers

2010

Forests, Animals, and Ambushes in the Alliterative Morte Arthure

Jeremy Withers

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/jeremy_withers/2/

This is a manuscript of an article from *Parergon: Journal of the Australian & New Zealand Association for Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 27 (2010): 85.
Posted with permission.

"Forests, Animals, and Ambushes in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*"

Jeremy Withers

Parergon: Journal of the Australian & New Zealand Association for Medieval and Early Modern Studies

27:1 (2010): 85-104

In the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, the forest is often depicted as an ideal place for ambushing one's enemy. Such persistent attacks lead many warriors in the poem to encounter densely wooded areas with trepidation and even at times with explicit violence towards these places. However, through its use of several arresting *locus amoenus* passages, the *Morte* demonstrates alternative ways for soldiers to experience natural landscapes. Rather than suggest that forests are inherently malicious and forbidding places (as many medieval romances have done), the poem suggests that when cleared of an immediate threat of ambush, natural landscapes can be restorative and intoxicating spaces for soldiers. Furthermore, the poem at times invites a marginalization of the deeds of warriors like Arthur by reminding its readers of the significance of the oft-ignored lives of animals that exist on the periphery of all military endeavors.

Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (c.1138), the pseudo-chronicle that bequeathed to the Middle Ages its highly influential version of the King Arthur legend, at times makes specific mention of the role of landscape in the military tactics of both the British and Roman forces during Arthur's war with Lucius. For example, Geoffrey tells us that, after Gawain has impetuously cut off the head of Lucius' boastful nephew, the Romans are pursuing Gawain and his men and "Just as they [the Romans] were riding up to a certain wood, so the story goes, there suddenly emerged from the trees about six thousand Britons, who had heard of the retreat of their leaders and had concealed themselves there in order to bring help."[1] And later, when the

[1] "Cum autem prope quondam siluam ut dictum est insequerentur confestim egrediuntur ex illa circiter sex milia britonum qui fugam consulum comperti infra eam delituerant ut eis auxilium subuectarent. Egressi autem subduxerunt calcaria equis suis & aera clamore replentes." Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Britanniae*, ed.

Roman army is all but decimated, Geoffrey tells us that "In their [the Romans'] terror some fled to out-of-the-way spots and forest groves, others made their way to cities and towns, and all of them sought refuge in the places which seemed safest to them."[2] This interest by Geoffrey in the military significance of landscape, and specifically in the forest as a place of danger as well as of sanctuary, carries on in some of the English offspring of Geoffrey's *Historia* such as Layamon's *Brut* and, most notably, the anonymously authored Alliterative *Morte Arthure*.

In this essay, I will consider further the emphasis on landscape and on environments of various kinds in Wace, Layamon and, in particular, the Alliterative *Morte*. These successors to Geoffrey of Monmouth strike me as impressively alert to the destructive capability of ambush tactics. But more importantly, Layamon and the *Morte*-poet, unlike Geoffrey and Wace, are aware of the ways in which a war defined largely by ambushes can cause forests to shift prism-like in the minds of their observers from being places of inherent beauty to places of anxiety-producing peril to places of last-ditch safety. In connection with my investigation of the relationship between ambushes and forests, this essay will explore a facet of the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* that has led to quite a bit of perplexity among its critics: the unexpected use of romance-style *locus amoenus* passages within this poem that shares more similarities to heroic epic than romance. It is my contention that the *Morte*-poet includes some of those *locus amoenus* passages as a way of highlighting alternative types of interactions between humans and manifestations of nature like forests and birds, alternatives that are closed down when soldiers enter densely wooded areas expecting a throng of enemies to explode out from behind every bush or tree.

Acton Griscom (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1929), p. 476. Modern English translation from *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (New York: Penguin, 1966), p. 242 (cited hereafter as Thorpe).

[2] "Disgregati igitur romani partim deuia & nemora cogente timore carpebant. Partim ciuitates & opida. & ad queque tutissima loca diffugiebant." *Historia Regum Britanniae*, p. 494. Modern English translation from *History of the Kings of Britain*, p. 256.

At this point, it is necessary to pause and defend some of the vocabulary this paper will be utilizing; particularly, its use of the words "nature" and "forest." I am well aware of the anachronism involved in using the word nature to refer to medieval plants, animals, seasons, and so forth, for medieval writers clearly did not use the word nature (*natura*) as an umbrella term for such diverse entities. Rather, as Economu summarizes it, nature referred to "the Platonic intermediary between the intelligible and material worlds; or for the divinely ordained power that presides over the continuity and preservation of whatever lives in the sublunary world; or for a creative principle directly subordinated to the mind and will of God."[3]

However, I think it is clear that for most medieval thinkers, environments like forests were clearly not "human" in the ways that built environments like castles and towns were, and that animals, despite many similarities with humans, constituted an ontologically distinct category from humans. In short, I subscribe to Kiser and Hanawalt's declaration that when studying medieval texts "nature…[is] both everywhere and nowhere," since for medieval and early modern writers "'nature' was arguably not even a discursive category; it simply went without saying."[4] In sum, despite the word nature's obvious problems, I will persist in using the word nature to refer to what I take to be readily understood as "the-not-human" by most medieval writers: nonhuman animals and nonhuman environments such as forests and meadows.[5] And finally, although "forest" has a quite technical meaning in the High and Late

---

[3] George Economu, *The Goddess Natura in Medieval Literature* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 2002), pp. 2-3.

[4] Barbara A. Hanawalt and Lisa J. Kiser, "Introduction," in *Engaging with Nature: Essays on the Natural World in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, eds. Hanawalt and Kiser (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 2008), pp. 1-2.

[5] On an implicit medieval recognition of a distinction between "human" environments and "natural" environments like forests, see Chapter Two of Ad Putter's Sir Gawain and the Green Knight *and French Arthurian Courtly Romance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995). On the distinction between humans and nonhuman animals, see for example, Pieter De Leemans and Matthew Klemm, "Animals and Anthropology in Medieval Philosophy," in *A Cultural History of Animals in the Medieval Age*, ed. Brigitte Resl (Oxford: Berg, 2007), pp. 153-177. Leemans and

Middle Ages, and a meaning that often has little to do with what we moderns mean by forest (e.g. abundance of trees) and has everything to do with the presence of game animals, I am using forest here and throughout this paper more in its modern sense of a tract of land full of trees, shrubs, and other dense vegetation that is not the private hunting preserve of an aristocrat or monarch.[6]

But now let us return to the texts under discussion, and move to a brief discussion of Robert Wace's *Roman de Brut* (c.1155), the widely accepted intermediary between Geoffrey of Monmouth and Layamon, and accepted source for Layamon's own *Brut*. Significantly, Wace's *Brut* dilates upon Geoffrey of Monmouth's scarce references to forests by often mentioning their tactical significance as places ripe for staging ambushes during Arthur's wars against the Saxons and the Romans. Most memorably, Wace refers repeatedly to the role of forests in military ambushes when describing the pursuit of Gawain by the Romans. In the span of some fifty lines (lines 11877-11927), Wace makes eight references to the centrality of the woods (*un bois*) as the place in which the British ambush of the pursuing Romans will soon unfold, a much more frequent set of references to topography than found in Geoffrey's *Historia.*[7]

Following Wace's lead, Layamon's *Brut* (c. 1190) reminds us six times in the course of approximately twenty-five lines of the prominence of the wooded landscape in the ambush by

---

Klemm's essay is an informative discussion of the influence on medieval thinking of Aristotelian distinctions between humans and animals.

[6] On the technical meaning of forest in the Middle Ages, see the following studies: Charles R. Young, *The Royal Forests of Medieval England* (Leicester: Leicester UP, 1979); Raymond Grant, *The Royal Forests of England* (Phoenix Mill: Alan Sutton, 1991); Leonard Chase, "Forests, Chases, Parks, and Warrens," in *The English Medieval Landscape*, ed. L. Cantor (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), pp. 56-85; William Perry Marvin, *Hunting Law and Ritual in Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2006).

[7] See lines 11878, 11883, 11877, 11915, 11917, 11919, 11920, 11924 in *Wace's* Roman de Brut*: A History of the British: Text and Translation*, presented, translated, and introduced by Judith Weiss (Exeter: Univ. of Exeter Press, 1999).

the British of the Romans.[8] But, more importantly, despite the obvious ways in which these wooded landscapes of Geoffrey, Wace, and Layamon embody the threat of sudden and ferocious military violence, Layamon surpasses Geoffrey's rare and Wace's frequent but unvaried references to woods and forests by adding significant details such as those that allude to soldiers preparing ambushes by entering "ane *ueire* wode" [a *beautiful* wood] (13275, emphasis mine) and by entering "in aenne wude / on aenne *swiðe faire* stude in ane dale deope" [in a wood, to a *very beautiful* place that stood in a deep valley] (13443-13444, emphasis mine).

In the above embellishments, Layamon is careful to remind us that the human perception of woods as an ideal place to stage an ambush in no way exhausts its significance. For even as troops are assuming their military positions within the dense foliage, the *Brut*-narrator catches us off-guard by commenting on how in this environment that will soon brim with human carnage "hit agon daiȝen and *deor gunnen waȝeȝen*" [day began to dawn and *the animals/deer began to stir*] (13447, emphasis mine).[9] This casual reminder about other forms of life in the woods that have little, if any, concern for the human drama about to unfold deflects attention, at least momentarily, away from Arthur and Lucius' military ambitions, ambitions that threaten to subsume the entire forest landscape.

What Layamon accomplishes with his references to beautiful forests brimming with energetic animals is a reminder to his readers that human militaristic perceptions of forests do not define them *in toto* (a point, I would argue, that does not much interest Geoffrey or Wace). Because wooded areas are ideal environments for concealing hordes of soldiers, and because ambushes appear to be the preferred tactic for waging war during Arthur's battles with Lucius,

---

[8] See lines 13275, 13277, 13283, 13285, 13296, 13298 for references to a "wude" as the place in which the Britons are hiding and which the Romans are approaching in their pursuit of Gawain and his fellow envoys.

[9] It is, of course, impossible to tell if Layamon intends for the use of "deor" here to mean wild animals in general, or the specific ungulate that we mean by the word "deer" today. At the time of the *Brut*'s composition, "deor" could have both of these meanings. See the Middle English Dictionary, s.v. "der," definitions (1) and (2).

forests would appear to embody for the British and Roman armies places conducive to fear and anxiety. Bartholomaeus Anglicus, writing of woods in his *De proprietatibus rerum*, offers up the following bleak assessment of places like forests: "In woode is place of deceipte…There place is of hydyne and of lurkynge, for ofte in wodes þeues beþ yhudde and oftere in here awaytes and deceytes passynge men comeþ and beþ yspoyled and yrobbed and ofte yslawe."[10]

However, by referring to the woods as being "ueire" and "swiðe faire," Layamon's *Brut* negates Trevisa's pessimistically essentialist remarks about wooded areas. Instead, Layamon's narrator invites readers to resist identifying too closely with the characters immersed in the military action of the poem by not allowing readers' perceptions of places like forests and woods to become dominated solely by an awareness of such environments' suitability as places of ambush. This opening up of possibilities for alternative ways to perceive densely wooded spaces, and for seeing them as more than just places where people are "under constant danger of attack from anarchical elements" and where "anyone who values his or her life must always be on guard," is an agenda that will be taken up and carried much further by the Alliterative *Morte*-poet.[11]

Emphatically building upon Geoffrey, Wace, and Layamon's tendencies to reference the types of landscape in which the Britons and Romans engage one another, the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* (c. 1365-1403), also makes specific mention of the type of landscape in which the battles between Arthur and his enemies take place.[12] In the middle section of the *Morte,* the section dealing mainly with Arthur's war with the Emperor Lucius, Middle English words for a densely

---

[10] Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *On the Properties of Things*, trans. John Trevisa, ed. M.C. Seymour *et al*., 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), ii, pp. 1040-1041. Quoted in Putter, *Courtly Romance*, p. 45.

[11] Putter, *Courtly Romance*, p. 21. Chapter Two of Putter's book, entitled "The Landscape of Courtly Romance," is a highly useful overview of the preponderance of negative representations of forests and wooded areas in medieval romance.

[12] All citations from the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* will be from the following edition: *Morte Arthure: A Critical Edition*, ed. Mary Hamel (New York: Garland, 1984).

wooded area (such as "forest," "holt," "wood," and "firth") are repeated time and time again, more often than not to remind the reader that the fighting is taking place in dense forest with decidedly Vegetian, ambush-style tactics being employed by both armies.[13] For example, when Sir Cador offers up advice to three of his peers on how best to proceed in their march through the forest, he makes sure to advise them to "Discoveres now sekerly skrogges and other, / That no scathel in the skrogges scorn us hereafter…/For na skomfitoure in skoulkery is skomfite euer" (1641-1644) [Search carefully the shrubs and other places, so that no foe in the shrubs shall subsequently harm us, for no attack from stealth (i.e. no ambush) is ever defeated]. And shortly after this dispensing of advice to his fellow knights, Cador indeed hears of "[f]ifty thousand…fers men of armes" (1710) lurking in the forest up ahead in order to ambush Cador and his men.

However, as we saw with Layamon's references to the forests being "ueire" and "swiðe faire," the *Morte*-poet is quite interested in this potential for the forest to be both a place of beauty and one of danger to the soldier marching through it. For example, at one point within the space of only ten lines the *Morte*-poet gives us the quasi-rhapsodic "schawes ware scheen vndyr þe schire eyuez" (1760) [the shrubs were shining under the noble eaves (of the forest)], only to then quickly follow up this lush description of the forest with "[t]hane schotte owtte of þe schawe schiltrounis many, / With scharpe wapynns of were schotand at ones" (1765-1766) [then shot out of the shrubs many troops, shooting at once with sharp weapons of war]. In this

[13] Open field or pitched battles, with armies assembled in carefully planned formations, do not much interest this poet. The word "Vegetian" comes from the late Roman theorist on military strategy, Vegetius. Stephen Morillo defines an important part of Vegetian-style warfare as "shadowing the invading army closely enough [so] as to prevent their foraging. Short of supplies and frustrated by a lack of booty from plundering, the invaders, it is hoped, will go home" (p. 23). Thus, the use of ambush and of deception, as well as of every available advantage a rugged terrain can offer a "shadowing army," are hallmarks of Vegetian strategy. See Stephen Morillo, "Battle Seeking: The Contexts and Limits of Vegetian Strategy," *Journal of Medieval Military History,* 1 (2003), pp. 21-41. For advice from Vegetius himself on the proper use of ambush, see *Vegetius: Epitome of Military Science*, trans. N.P. Milner, 2nd ed. (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 1993), pp. 80-2.

example of the forest's foliage seeming at first innocuous and enchanting, and then suddenly erupting with a throng of enemies, we see how the *Morte*-poet is quite aware of how medieval warfare creates the conditions in which it would be impossible – or dangerously foolish – for a warrior to become overly lost in contemplation of the forest's intrinsic beauty.

We should also recall here that later in the poem, when Arthur is speaking with Sir Cradock, the Round Table knight-turned-pilgrim who provides Arthur with the news of Mordred's rebellion back home, Arthur is at first amazed that this pilgrim is so intrepid as to walk through the war zone created by Arthur's war with the Tuscans. In his state of astonishment, Arthur asks of Cradock: "Whedire wilnez thowe, wye, walkande thyn one? / Qwhylls þe werlde es o werre, a wawhte I it hold. / *Here es ane enmye with oste vndire yone vynes*" [Where are you wishing to go, sir, walking all alone? While this world is at war, I hold such a thing a danger. *Here is an enemy with his host under yonder vines*.] (3479-3481, emphasis added). Significantly, this encounter occurs after we are told Arthur has destroyed the vineyards of Tuscany.[14] Perhaps the poet provides us here with additional motivation as to why Arthur attacks and devastates the Tuscan vines with the ruthlessness that he does (lines 3158-3160): not only are they an agricultural resource of the civilian population, but they might also provide concealment for Arthur's enemies and a place from which they can stage ambushes.[15] These fearful lines of Arthur to Sir Cradock about enemies lurking in the vines provide additional evidence of the *Morte*-poet's awareness of the intersections between medieval military tactics,

[14] In his prominent descriptions of Arthur's destruction of the Tuscan vineyards, the *Morte*-poet may be drawing upon and relocating a reference in Wace's *Brut* (lines 10125ff.) to the ravaging of vineyards.

[15] Motivation for this act of destruction is somewhat hard to discern, for we are told that after defeating the Tuscans, Arthur and his men "revel with rich wine" (3172). In Arthur's destruction of the Tuscan vineyards, he doesn't seem to realize – or care – that he is destroying the very source of those things such as wine he so indulgently savors. Yet Arthur's justified fear of ambush may provide the missing motivation here for his keenness for decimating the dense vegetation of the vineyards.

human perceptions of the natural world, and the material effects of those tactics and perceptions upon plants and animals.

What emerges from these repeated scenarios in the poem of ambush in thick vegetation is the suggestion that the commonplace Vegetian tactics of medieval warfare contribute to a perception by soldiers of "wild places" like forests and woods as dangerous and threatening because those places have poor visibility and myriad hiding places for large contingents of enemy forces. Or, to put this idea another way, the Alliterative *Morte*-poet's forests are not those most often depicted in Malory's *Morte Darthur*, for in the latter's work forests can often come to typify spaces of rejuvenation or of the potential for adventure and chivalric self-fashioning.[16] The poet of the Alliterative *Morte*, on the other hand, appears much more interested in creating a "reality effect" with his forests, and one that registers the psychological state of most soldiers marching through a forest in enemy territory who might have seen those forests, with their obstructed visibility, as anxiety-inducing places haunted by a constant threat of attack.

As we know from several examples culled from medieval history, the impeded visibility and the potentiality for ambush of a forest or wooded area could indeed have very real material repercussions for the plants and trees of such areas. Henry II, while waging war in Wales against the native population in 1165, found his army at one point separated from the enemy Welsh army by the wooded Vale of Ceiriog. "A standoff ensued," John D. Hosler informs us, "with neither side moving to approach the other through the difficult and potentially dangerous forest…[Eventually King Henry] ordered his men into the woods to cut down the trees that

[16] For a discussion of the use of forest imagery in Malory's *Morte Darthur*, see Sally Firmin, "Deep and Wide: Malory's Marvellous Forest," in *Sir Thomas Malory: Views and Re-views*, ed. D. Thomas Hanks, Jr. (New York: AMS Press, 1992), pp. 26-39. As Firmin's title suggests, she is only interested in one type of forest in Malory's vast book: the marvellous, romance-influenced forest. However, Corinne J. Saunders has pointed out that even though marvellous forests represent the majority of those depicted in Malory, the earlier sections of his *Morte Darthur* (which are probably drawing upon the same chronicle sources as the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*) depict realistic forests which Merlin even uses to coordinate military ambushes against Arthur's enemies. See Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance: Avernus, Broceliande, Arden* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1993), pp. 163-85.

separated the opposing armies."[17] And in recent archaeological studies of Montgomery Castle, an English fortification from the later medieval period that was erected in Wales, evidence of deforestation around the castle's perimeter has come to light. Such widespread removal of the surrounding vegetation was presumably used as a means to facilitate visibility around the castle and to ensure that enemies could not approach the structure too closely without being detected by the watchmen upon the walls.[18] We might recall here that when Arthur is being given an update by two of his messengers on Emperor Lucius' invasion of Arthur's French territories, he is told that Lucius "felles forests fele, forays thy landes…he felles thy folk and fanges their goodes" [fells many forests, ravages your lands…he slays your people and takes their goods] (1247-49).[19] One of Lucius' reasons for devastating the forests of France could be to deprive Arthur, whose counter-offensive Lucius must know is imminent, of any cover from which to launch an retaliatory ambush or surprise attack of any kind.[20]

---

[17] John D. Hosler, "Henry II's Military Campaigns in Wales, 1157 and 1165," *Journal of Medieval Military History,* 2 (2004), 53-71 (p. 68). Hosler tells us that Henry learned to resort to this drastic tactic of chopping down large numbers of trees after having had "personally experienced the dangers of headlong marches into forests during his first Welsh campaign of 1157" (p. 69). For chronicle evidence of Henry's felling of the wood of Ceiriog, see the following pages in some of the versions of the vernacular Welsh chronicle *Brut y Tywysogyon*: *Brut y Tywysogyon or The Chronicle of Princes: Red Book of Hergest Version*, trans. Thomas Jones (Cardiff: Univ. of Wales Press, 1955), 147; *Brut y Tywysogyon or the Chronicle of Princes: Peniarth MS 20 Version*, trans. Thomas Jones (Cardiff: Univ. of Wales Press, 1952), p. 63; *Brenhinedd y Saesson or The Kings of the Saxons: BM Cotton MS Cleopatra BV and the Black Book of Basingwerk NLW MS 7006*, trans. Thomas Jones (Cardiff: Univ. of Wales Press, 1971), p. 167.

[18] See Jeremy K. Knight, "Excavations at Montgomery Castle: Part I," *Archaeologia Cambrensis*, 141 (1992), 97-180.

[19] It is interesting that the poet uses the same word "felles" (a verb meaning both to cut down and to slay) twice in the course of only three lines to describe *both* Lucius' violence against people and his violence against trees, thereby, at least on some level, equating the two deeds. See *MED*, s.v. "fellen," definitions (3b) and (4).

[20] There is an historical model for Lucius' actions in the *Chronicle* of Henry Knighton. When describing John of Lancaster and Richard II's invasions of Scotland in 1385, Knighton comments on how both leaders were known to lead their troops in razing vast tracts of woodland to the ground and then burning the trees. Of John of Lancaster's actions, Knighton reports that "It was said you might have heard the sound of 80,000 axes at work, chopping down trees which were then fed to the flames." Although there might be a purely economic reasons for such actions (i.e. depriving the citizens of these villages and manors of places to gather essential fuel or to graze pigs), there could also be strategic reasons for eradicating the dense woods and forests surrounding the Scottish villages: such places could provide places for citizens to hide and for Scottish soldiers to initiate counter-attacks. See Henry Knighton, *Knighton's Chronicle 1337-1396*, ed. and trans. G. H. Martin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 335 (John of Lancaster), p. 337 (Richard II).

Interested as the *Morte*-poet and his predecessors like Layamon are in the fluctuating significance of wooded landscapes, it should not surprise us that even forests are never fully reducible to places of life-threatening peril. They can also be a soldier's salvation. That is, in addition to locations uniquely suited for offensive tactics such as ambushes, forests are also depicted as places that individual soldiers or large contingents of troops can melt into for defensive reasons if it necessary to do so. Medieval military commanders, for obvious reasons, preferred an enemy force that stayed out in the open and fought in open fields. Consequently, appeals to an enemy's sense of chivalric honor were often invoked by commanders in an attempt to dislodge an opposing army from their dogged positions within densely covered areas or upon hilltops. But the *Morte*-poet, like Shakespeare's Falstaff, knows that honour cannot heal a wound or set a broken bone, and so when the going gets tough, the smart are often shown fleeing to the cover of the woods.

For example, after Cador, Kay, and Cliges capture several of Lucius' Saracen captains, we are told that "When the chevalry saw their cheftaines were nomen, / To a chef forest they chosen their wayes, / And feeled them so faint they fell in the greves, / In the feren of the firth for ferd of our people" [When the knights saw their leaders were taken, to a large forest they went, and feeling so faint they fell into the thicket, amid the ferns of the forest in fear of our people.] (1872-1875). But because the Saracen warriors are exhausted, demoralized, and in no condition to take up an appropriately stalwart defensive position, the Britons swoop in to slaughter them "By [the] hundrethes" (1879). Lest we think, however, that retreating to the cover of the forest constitutes the action solely of cowardly Saracens, we should point out that Arthur's forces are depicted as performing similar actions, such as when earlier in the battle the Romans have the upper hand over the English. After Sir Bois and his men find themselves being bested

by a more robust Roman contingent, we are told "the Bretons on the bente abides no longer, / But fled to the forest and the feld leved" [the Britons on the field abide no longer, but fled to the forest and left the field] (1431-1432). In short, the poem depicts the forest as being a place of which both those on the offensive and on the defensive can avail themselves, and, consequently, densely wooded areas might seem to soldiers as though they have been created by God explicitly with the needs of warriors in mind.

Just as the brief considerations above of Montgomery Castle and of Henry II's Welsh campaigns reveal late medieval warfare's effects upon people's perceptions of some of the wooded areas in the British Isles, the *Morte*-poet exposes the ways in which that the conditions and goals of certain types of warfare can lead to the perception of the forest as a dangerous place, and one that ought perhaps to be encountered more with a sense of suspicion and fear than with awe or aesthetic admiration. But in the Alliterative *Morte* there is an exploration of an alternative way in which warriors and natural environments might encounter one another, for the *Morte*-poet does provide a striking image of a more benign interaction between medieval men-at-arms and the plants and animals they encounter when out on campaign.

If we now turn to an examination of the pastoral scene that Gawain and his fellow troops stumble upon (while out on a foraging expedition technically being led by Sir Florente), we find that the *Morte*-poet employs this *locus amoenus* passage to highlight the contingent nature of perceptions of the forest landscapes as ominous and threatening, or as a place to keep a constant eye on in case one needs to vanish into it to avoid an attack.[21] The purpose of the lavish

[21] For the only study I know of that discusses these *locus amoenus* passages in depth, see John Finlayson, "Rhetorical 'Descriptio' of Place in the Alliterative 'Morte Arthure,'" *Modern Philology,* 61:1 (1963), 1-11. In Finlayson's very useful discussion of the poem's use of *locus amoenus* passages, he identifies four examples which are as follows: the first example immediately precedes Arthur's battle with the Giant of Mont St. Michel (920-932); the second occurs during Gawain and his retinue's foraging for food during Arthur's siege of Metz (2501-2512); the third when Gawain returns to his retinue after having left them in order to seek "wondyrs" and after he has met and

descriptions of natural beauty like that of the meadow Gawain and the other troops discover is that it shows that when soldiers are removed from the immediate vicinity of war and of the constant threat of ambush (as these troops are when they leave the siege of Metz to forage), a landscape is then free to be encountered and perceived in a vastly different way by warriors. In the poem, when Arthur sends this small retinue of warriors into the mountains to forage for supplies, while Arthur himself is engaged in a protracted siege at the town of Metz, those warriors encounter nature in a way that the armies of Arthur and Lucius appear utterly unable to do. Rather than hastily plunder nature for its resources, or destroy it as a form of economic attrition against the enemy, the poet tells us how the men-at-arms who accompany Gawain indulgently bask in this natural environment that is so far removed from the din of war raging below the mountains. Here, the poet of the Alliterative *Morte* displays his impressive skills for composing arresting descriptions of natural scenery:

> Now ferkes to þe fyrthe thees fresche men of armes,
> To þe fell so fewe, theis fresclyche byernes,
> Thorowe hopes and hymland, hillys and oþer,
> Holtis and hare woddes with heslyn schawes [hazel copses],
> Thorowe marasse and mosse and montes so heghe;
> And in the myste [of] mornyng on a mede falles,
> Mawen and vnmade, maynoyrede bott lyttyll,
> In swathes sweppen down, full of swete floures.

---

engaged in combat with Priamus (2670-2677); and the final example is during Arthur's second dream that depicts a visitation from Lady Fortune (3230-3249). Because the fourth *locus amoenus* passage that Finlayson identifies (the dream world one involving Lady Fortune) strikes me as being so different from the other three, and as depicting a landscape indebted more to dream-poems such as Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* and the anonymous Middle English *Pearl*, I am leaving out of my discussion of the Alliterative *Morte* an analysis of this fourth example of a *locus amoenus* passage in the poem in order to focus on the other three "waking world" descriptions of landscape.

Thare vnbryills theis bolde and baytes þeire horses,

To þe grygynge of þe daye, þat byrdez gan synge,

Whylls the surs of þe sonne, þat sonde es of Cryste,

That solaces all synfull þat syghte has in erthe. (2501-2512)

[Now these bold men of arms travel hastily to the forest, to the streaked hill, these vigorous men, through valleys and highlands, hills and other, holts and grey woods with thickets of hazel, through morass and marsh and mountains so high. And in the mist of morning they come upon a meadow, mown but unmade[22], cultivated but little, swept down in swaths, full of sweet flowers. There these bold men unsaddle and pasture their horses, at the dawning of the day, when birds begin to sing, during the rising of the sun, that is messenger of Christ, who solaces all the sinful who have sight on earth.]

Although Arthur's soldiers are clearly in some kind of managed tract of land, the poet here affirms the significance of nature beyond its agricultural or technological value as raw material. The smell of flowers, the song of birds, the sight of mist over a morning meadow: all of these are extolled as a healing counterpoint to Arthur's wars that only permit misery and death to flourish.

Interestingly, for our poet it is not necessary to find an Edenic locale that is pristine and untouched by human labour in order to experience the "solace" of plants and animals.[23] It is sufficient to encounter this landscape that contains a meadow visibly altered by humans

[22] Mary Hamel, citing the OED, defines "unmade" hay as that which has not yet been turned over and exposed to the sun. See the note to line 2507 in Hamel, *Morte Arthure*, p. 336. Perhaps the reference to "unmade" hay gestures towards the ways in which agriculture often came to a debilitating halt in the Middle Ages in times of war, as peasants fled the vicinity of a battle or sought sanctuary inside a castle's walls for prolonged periods of time.

[23] For a study of animal imagery in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* that looks at passages different from those in this essay, and which analyzes those passages through the lens of Boethian ideas about the slippage between human and animal identity as a result of sin, see Brent Miles, "'Lyouns Full Lothely': Dream Interpretation and Boethian Denaturing in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*," *Arthuriana*, 18:1 (2008), 41-62.

("Mawen and vnmade /…In swathes sweppen down") as long as it is through a mental framework that perceives it in a way vastly different from that of a warrior; that is, different from a militaristic mental framework in which birdsong and sweet flowers would be worthless because you can not eat them out on campaign, and in which the temptation might exist to set a torch to the plants that you see because of their potential aid to an enemy population in the vicinity. In fact, what I would like to suggest is that another use by the *Morte*-poet of his *locus amoenus* descriptions, such as this one we are given when Gawain and Arthur's other troops are out foraging, is to create a dichotomy between nature as it appears when soldiers are expecting lethal enemies to burst out from its cover at any moment, and nature as it appears when soldiers have left the immediate vicinity of open hostilities with an enemy.

Astonishingly, most of the knights that accompany Gawain into the mountains are in no discernable hurry to return to their king's siege outside Metz. Gawain, after straying from the pastoral meadow to pursue the mounted warrior Priamus who he had spotted riding nearby, and after doing battle nearly to the death with Priamus, returns to his fellow soldiers reclining in the meadow and finds them in (what we might most accurately refer to) as a spellbound state:

> Lordes lenande lowe on lemand scheldes,
> With lowde laghttirs on lofte for lykyng of byrdez,
> Of larkes, of lynkwhyttez, þat lufflyche songen;
> And some was sleghte on slepe with sleyghte of þe pople,
> Þat sange in þe seson in the schenne schawes,
> So lawe in þe lawndez so lykand notes. (2672-2677)

[There noblemen lie down on gleaming shields, with loud laughter lifting high for delight of the birds, of larks, of linnets, that beautifully sang. And some had fallen asleep because

of the skillful singing of the creatures,[24] who sang in that season in the shining thickets, their pleasant notes so gentle in the glades of the forest.]

Nature has here rid these formerly bellicose men of their desire to fight, instilling in them instead a desire to envelop themselves in the "lykand notes" of the birds. As Finlayson points out in his analysis of this passage, the particularity of the types of birds ("larkes" and "lynkwhyttez") singing in the foliage makes this passage stand apart from the plethora of overly generic nature descriptions we find in medieval poetry, and which contributes to the *Morte*-poet creating a "spring landscape…[that] is neither completely formal and idealized nor without sensuous vividness."[25]

At this point in the poem, the landscape that Gawain's fellow troops inhabit represents the antithesis of the many other natural landscapes that populate the poem, for it is located at a distance from where the heavy fighting occurs and, consequently, the soldiers are free to drop their guard, to find respite from the tension created by a perpetual fear of ambush, and to experience more fully the inherent beauty of their surroundings. When Gawain rides off from this meadow, abandoning his men in order to seek "wonders" (2514) and eventually to duel with Priamus, it shows his rejection of the peace-loving values that this newly discovered landscape symbolizes, and his zealous (re)embracing of the life of the romance knight which constantly requires the performance of violence to sustain chivalric identity.[26] But when Gawain's fellow

---

[24] For this line, I follow the TEAMS edition for glossing line 2675. See *King Arthur's Death: The Middle English* Stanzaic Morte Arthur *and* Alliterative Morte Arthure, ed. Larry D. Benson, rev. ed. Edward E. Foster (Kalamazoo: TEAMS, 1994), p. 212. In her edition of the poem, Krishna provides this note for line 2675: "*pople*. For this word used of animals see *OED people* sb 1 c."

[25] Finlayson, "Rhetorical 'Descriptio,'" p. 7.

[26] On the relentlessly performative nature of chivalric identity, see Dorsey Armstrong, *Gender and the Chivalric Community of Malory's* Morte d'Arthur (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2003). As some scholars have pointed out, Arthur's increasing recklessness and rapacity for military encounters are paralleled throughout the poem in the actions of Gawain. On the Arthur-Gawain parallel, see the following: Jörg O. Fichte, "The Figure of Sir Gawain" in

soldiers stay behind to listen to birdsong while, significantly, lying upon one of the most distinct symbols of the military community and its bellicose values (their shields), it provides an indelible image for the sensuous attractiveness of peace, and for the *Morte*-poet's awareness that benign encounters between warriors and nature are possible once the former can succeed in extracting themselves from their military goals and military identities. It is only when Gawain returns from his duel with Priamus, and the soldiers see how grievously injured Gawain is, that the spell of this natural landscape is shattered and Gawain's bleeding wounds force the soldiers to reinhabit their customary mental world, a world centred around violence and the chivalric obsession with glory and prowess.

The inspiration for these pastoral interludes found in the *Morte* might, in fact, very well be "lyrical headpieces" like those found in such works as *Kyng Alisaunder* and *Of Arthour and of Merlin*, two poems preserved in the famous Auchinleck manuscript, or in short ballads such as "The Siege of Calais."[27] Although written too late to be a direct source, the latter poem, which describes the battle between the English and the French (and their allies) for the coveted French port town of Calais, opens with the following reminder about the processes of nature occurring in the background of the military action upon which the poem focuses:

> In Iuyll when the sonne shone shene,
> Bowes burgoned, and leves grene
> Gan change thaire coloures;
> And fresshe floures that April made
> Began to feynt and fade,

The Alliterative Morte Arthure: *A Reassessment of the Poem*, ed. Karl Heinz Göller (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1981), pp. 106-116; Christopher Dean, "Sir Gawain in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*," *Papers on Language and Literature,* 22:2 (1986), 115-125.

[27] The phrase "lyrical headpieces" comes from John Scattergood, "Validating the High Life in *Of Arthour and of Merlin* and *Kyng Alisaunder*," *Essays in Criticism*, 54:4 (2004), 323-350.

Of lovely swete odours;

And faire floures grete and smale

Gan to ripe and wax pale. (1-8)[28]

The following is another typical example of one of these lyrical headpieces, this one culled from *Kyng Alisaunder*:

Whan corn ripeþ in heruest-tyde,

Mery it is in felde and hyde,

Synne it is and shame to chide,

For shameful dedes springeþ wyde.

Knighttes willeþ on huntyng ride –

Þe dere galpeþ by wode-syde. (457-462)

As commentators such as Chism and Scattergood have argued, one intended function of the lyrical headpieces such as those above is that they force the reader to consider the larger environment in which military ventures occur, ventures such as that of Alexander's ambitious campaign of world domination. In other words, although Alexander may solipsistically believe that his own life and goals constitute the centre of the world, the headpieces force a "zooming-out" on the part of the reader's attention, reminding them of different worlds and different sets of values than those embodied by Alexander, and which exist back home in the courts or in the

[28] "The Siege of Calais" can be found in *Historical Poems of the XIV and XV Centuries*, ed. Rossell Hope Robbins (New York: Columbia UP, 1959), pp. 78-83. Also, on two occasions, Sir Thomas Malory includes descriptions of the natural world as preludes to the action that follows: one occurs at the beginning of "The Knight of the Cart" and one at the beginning of "The Death of King Arthur" in Malory's *Morte Darthur*. In this second instance, Malory is more interested in exposing the *rift* between the human social world and the natural world. That is, at the moment when May is causing the plants to rejuvenate, Arthur's kingdom is near the point of complete disintegration and destruction. Thus, like the headpieces in "Siege of Calais" and *Kyng Alisaunder* (discussed below), this second lyrical interlude in Malory foregrounds the independent existence of nature and how its alternative forms of life can thrive just fine in the face of "catastrophic" human political crises. For Malory's two "May passages," see *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, 3rd edition, ed. Eugène Vinaver, rev. P.J.C. Field, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

forests Alexander has left behind in order to conquer the exotic locales of the East. As Scattergood expresses it: "generally…they [the lyrical headpieces] posit an experiential alternative to the argument of heroism that this sort of romance [*Kyng Alisaunder*] posits."[29] I would argue that the positing of an "experiential alternative" is also at work in the pastoral interludes of the Alliterative *Morte*, such as that involving Gawain and his troops out foraging around Metz. For it is in those moments that the reader glimpses the possibilities for existing in wild places like forests, woods, and meadows that are closed down by an incessant fighting and constant staging of ambushes in those environments.

Another one of these pastoral interludes in the *Morte* that is worth examining is the astonishing one that occurs as Arthur and his knights Sir Bedvere and Sir Kayous are making their ascent up Mont St. Michel so that Arthur can confront the Giant who is mercilessly ravaging the region. Before these three warriors make it to the top of the mountain, the poet pauses in his narrative and gives us the following description of the natural surroundings:

> Than they roode by þat ryuer þat rynnyd so swythe,
>
> Thare þe ryndez ouerrechez with reall bowghez;
>
> The roo and þe raynedere reklesse thare ronnen,
>
> In ranez and in rosers, *to ryotte þam seluen*;[30]

---

[29] Scattergood, "Validating the High Life," p. 346. Chism evinces support for Scattergood's assessment of the role of the lyrical headpieces when she writes that due to these headpieces "the poem ensures we cannot forget that masculine war, far from comprising the whole world, is a willed interruption in larger cycles and other social performances. In the summer heat amidst the beauty of women's voices that reach from the courtly hall to the tents of maying or of the battle-camp itself, Alexander's violent intentions become extraordinary and deliberate, a choice with harsh profits, denaturalized…In a poem about a relentlessly extended series of campaigns, such salutary contrasts [as the headpieces provide] intensify awareness of the chivalric extremes to which Alexander is driven even while reminding us that they are not unquestionable or inevitable." See Christine Chism, "Winning Women in Two Medieval Alexander Poems," in *Women and Medieval Epic: Gender, Genre, and the Limits of Epic Masculinity*, eds. Sarah S. Poor and Jana K. Schulman (New York: Palgrave, 2007), pp. 15-39 (p.20-21).

[30] In the TEAMS edition, the editors gloss the second half of this line as "to amuse themselves." However, in Middle English a "-self" ending reinforces the pronoun and adds emphasis to it, rather than functioning as a reflexive pronoun like the "-self" ending does in Modern English. For a discussion of the "-self" ending and how

The frithez ware floreschte with flourez full many,

With fawcouns and fesantez of ferlyche hewez;

All þe feulez thare fleshez that flyez with wengez,

Fore thare galede þe gowke one greuez full lowde:

Wyth alkyn gladchipe þay gladden þem seluen;

Of þe nyghtgale notez þe noisez was swette –

They threpide wyth the throstills, thre hundreth at ones;

That whate swowyng of watyr and syngyng of byrdez,

It myghte salue hym of sore þat sounde was neuere!

(920-932, emphasis added)

[Then they rode by that river that ran so swiftly, where the banks are overhung with magnificent boughs. The roe and the reindeer *they* recklessly run in thickets and in rosebushes *to take pleasure*. The woods flourished with many flowers, with falcons and pheasants of marvellous hues. There flashed all the birds that fly with wings and there cried loudly the cuckoo in the woods: *with all manner of delight they themselves are filled with joy*. Sweet was the noise of the nightingales' notes: they competed with the song-thrushes, three hundred at once. Such murmuring of water and singing of birds might soothe him of suffering that never was sound!]

Like the lyrical headpieces found in *Kyng Alisaunder* and *Of Arthour and of Merlin*, and like Layamon's "deor...waȝeȝen", this pastoral interlude disrupts the main action of the narrative, and reminds the audience of alternative values and alternative forms of life (such as those of

---

reflexive pronouns work in Middle English, see J.A. Burrow and Thorlac Turville-Petre, *A Book of Middle English*, 2nd ed. (London: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 43-44.

animals) that are marginalized by excessive focus on the exploits of a hero like Arthur. In very beautiful and serene language, the poet depicts for us here a scene in which animals are represented as being subjects capable of inherent enjoyment in their own existences. As opposed to the medieval commonplace of referring to animals as "dumb beasts," these lines depict animals as capable of mental states that are valued by humans in their own lives, such as those states of mind suffused with amusement and joy. For our poet, the value of this effusion of bodily action and of song lies in the pleasure it brings *to the animals* (lines 923 and 928). We must, of course, acknowledge that the poet also perceives such sights and sounds as beneficial to humans (line 932), but that single line fails to eclipse the recognition within it of animals' inherent pleasure in their own bodies and, ultimately, their own lives.

This scene of the wooded mountainside brimming with animal life is, we should recall, a prelude to Arthur's one-on-one fight with the monstrous Giant. In a description that is entirely original to the Alliterative *Morte*, the poet depicts the Giant of Mont St. Michel as a freakish conglomeration of animal parts: the skin of a frog, the nose of a hawk, the mouth of a flounder, the neck of a bull, and so forth (lines 1074-1104). The effect of such a description is that when Arthur attacks the Giant, the fight has been set up as something of an epic battle between Arthur and the entire animal world. But this is not to imply that the Giant is some kind of unfortunate animal-victim of Arthur's aggression, for earlier in the description of the Giant we are told that his gastronomical preferences lean towards "Bernes *and bestail* broched togeders" (1050, emphasis added) [men *and beasts* spitted together]. The Giant, despite his hyper-animality, is also an aggressor towards animals.

But the fight that follows between Arthur and the Giant, a fight culminating in a most unchivalric and inelegant wrestling match followed by a tumble off the side of the mountain,

reminds us in its parodic excess that nothing of far-reaching significance is at stake in this battle. For even though it is suggested that the Giant lives as a glutton who feasts rapaciously on animal and human life, the pastoral meadow scene that Arthur passes on his way up the mountain reminds us that the animal population on Mont St. Michel is thriving just fine, is under no dire threat, and hence is in no need of a "hero" like Arthur to swoop in to exterminate the Giant. Thus, like the lyrical headers of *Kyng Alisaunder*, the pastoral interlude the *Morte*-poet gives us during Arthur's ascent of the mountain reminds the reader that there is a vibrant, alternative world of experience pulsating in the background and beyond the frame of Arthur's "epic" fight with the Giant.

As many recent studies of the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* have argued, it is becoming increasingly difficult to affirm that the poem demonstrates anything like a bald and unambivalent acceptance of the harsh realities of medieval warfare.[31] But as I have argued above, the poet's concerns about warfare's influence upon the environments in which it is situated (such as the civilian centres of Tuscany) extends to include an awareness of warfare's far-reaching effects upon plant and animal communities as well. Rather than just accept essentialist views of ambush-ready forests as vile and God-forsaken places, and of animals as worthless unless they can transport military supplies or be ridden into battle, the *Morte*-poet holds out for his readers

[31] I see my article as situated within a growing body of scholarship that perceives the poet's stance on his Arthur-figure as largely an unflattering and critical one. This school of thought on the *Morte* can largely be traced back to the only book-length study of the poem, William Matthews, *The Tragedy of Arthur: A Study of the Alliterative "*Morte Arthure*"* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1960), particularly pp. 115-150. Recent readings of the poem that see the text as condemning Arthur's martial and imperial actions include Christine Chism, *Alliterative Revivals* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), pp. 189-236; Andrew Lynch, "'Peace is good after war': The Narrative Seasons of English Arthurian Tradition" in *Writing War: Medieval Literary Responses to Warfare*, eds. Corinne Saunders, Francoise Le Saux, and Neil Thomas (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), pp. 127-146; Dorsey Armstrong, "Rewriting the Chronicle Tradition: The Alliterative *Morte Arthure* and Arthur's Sword of Peace," *Parergon* 25:1 (2008), 81-101; Miles, "'Lyouns Full Lothely.'" Patricia DeMarco has recently argued that the poem does not critique warfare *per se*; rather, it is most interested in criticizing the centralist and absolutist tendencies of Arthur's interactions with his nobles. See DeMarco, "An Arthur for the Ricardian Age: Crown, Nobility, and the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*," *Speculum* 80:2 (2005), 464-493.

the suggestion that when places like forests and meadows – and their animal denizens – can be encountered with minds devoid of martial ambition, such places are inherently fascinating and restorative places indeed. And although Arthur may think that his battles in England, France, Germany, and Italy are the centre of the universe at the moment, our poet's sly and frequent reminders about the animal life that teems in the margins of the poem give the reader faith that Arthur's imperialist reach can never be as wide and absolute as he would like to think. When Arthur, Mordred, Lucius, and the Giant of Mont St. Michel are all dead and gone, the transporting beauty of birdsong and the sublime sheen of light upon forest leaves will still be there.