

*WILDERNESS IN  
THE MEDIEVAL  
ENGLISH MIND:  
1066 - 1400*

Masters Thesis in History *Spring 2022*

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# FOREWORD

First and foremost, I give a great thank to my supervisor, the excellent professor Anders Winroth. Without his supervision I do not know how I could have finished this thesis in the way it ended up. He has supervised me since March 2021 until early June 2022. The comments on my chapters by Steffen Hope, Frances Ota, Tatiana Petrukhina, Ole Fredrik Kullerud, Birgitte Tveito, Karoline Riul, Michele Baitieri, and Knut Harald Gjellestad of the University of Oslo, and Daniel Armstrong of the University of St Andrews. Finally, my partner, Nathalie Lier has been essential for my mental well-being and for critical comments from the outside of academia. Without her I would not manage to submit the thesis on time.

# SUMMARY

This thesis considers the relationship people in post-Conquest medieval England had to wilderness in the form of largely wooded areas. Three different kinds of literary primary sources are analysed for indications of the nature such relationships. They are forest laws, bestiaries, and romances. They all reflect fragments or traces of the relationships to people's wilderness surroundings at the time. Of these sources are asked two questions: (1) Which aspects of people's relationship with wilderness are reflected? (2) And which social groups' relationships to the wilderness do they reflect? The second question addresses the problematic term 'people' in the first question. It is the aim of the thesis that analysis of a selection of these literary sources will contribute to a construction of the relationship people in medieval England had with their surrounding natural landscape. It is reflected in these sources that to the medieval English mind, the wilderness could carry a combination of a range of different meanings. For some, the wilderness as a hunting ground were most prevalent, while for others, the material resources that could be extracted would be the essential function of the forest. For those choosing to take it seriously, the forest could also carry mystical and religious meaning: it could be enchanted as in the romances; it could be used as cover for things unwanted in society; and it could be a place in which great adventures were possible.

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# INTRODUCTION

This thesis considers the relationship people in post-Conquest medieval England had to wilderness in the form of largely wooded areas. Three different kinds of literary primary sources are analysed for indications of the nature such relationships. They are forest laws, bestiaries, and romances. They all reflect fragments or traces of the relationships to people's wilderness surroundings at the time. The significant differences in genre between the sources might cancel out some indicators found due to the nature of the specific genres. Of these sources are asked two questions: (1) Which aspects of people's relationship with wilderness are reflected? (2) And which social groups' relationships to the wilderness do they reflect? The second question addresses the problematic term 'people' in the first question. It is the aim of the thesis that analysis of a selection of these literary sources will contribute to a construction of the relationship people in medieval England had with their surrounding natural landscape.

There are at least two questions that might come to mind following the questions asked of the sources. The first is: Did people generally have a practical relationship with wilderness? The wilderness contained most of the materials that was needed to build a functioning society: stone, wood, branches, straw, clay. It also contained a variety of food sources such as meat from wild animals, mushrooms, herbs, and other variants. Was this all there was to the wilderness or was there something more to it? Was their relationship simply an instinct of survival in the same way some might argue dogs relate to their food, or was there something more to this relationship? We sometimes see nature depicted in modern art as something aesthetically pleasing to the human mind. Can we apply the same to medieval art, both in written and pictorial form, depicting nature such as trees and grass? On what grounds did laws regulate the use of natural resources? Would people go on walks in the forest for other reasons than simply to travel from one place to another? And did they enjoy their travels through nature? Most of these questions are likely not possible to come to a general conclusion for most medieval people, but they might provide indicators to what the case was, if any traces of them are found.

The second question one could ask is: Did at least some people living in medieval England express or carry any emotional connection with nature? Possible mentions of such metaphysical relationships with nature might be found in texts describing nature as beautiful, mystical, magical, or symbolic. Such emotions are commonly expressed in our own days through many kinds of media and arts. Paintings of natural landscapes and animals might signify a positive metaphysical relationship with at least some aspects of nature. There are also stories in folklore and modern fantasy writings that emphasise mythological creatures such as, werewolves, demons, trolls, and other creatures normally considered fabulous. If to an extent believed, these creatures, and the enchanted forests they live in form part of an emotional connection with the natural world outside human society. Emotional connections with the more regular aspects of the forest, such as its potential for beauty or danger are things to look for in medieval texts as well. However, it is important to keep an open mind when approaching such sources to interpret them from the perspective of the author and its medieval readership.

The second part of the thesis question is: Who read or at least knew the contents of the texts analysed? This period of English history saw an increase in literacy, correlating with an increase in the number of literary works produced and copied. Aural literacy was commonplace in our period, and the sources analysed are in either of the three main languages of medieval England: English, French, and Latin. It was more common to be able to hear the contents of books (aural literacy) rather than reading them by oneself. The common way of reading in medieval England was to read out loud. It was also not uncommon to memorise texts one had read followed by oral performance of the texts to other people.<sup>1</sup> Sermons would be the same in a sense; orally presented contents of texts, biblical and otherwise to the poor. Bestiaries were often used as sermon material for their didactic value.<sup>2</sup> We must assume that most knowledge of our sources were spread orally rather than literally. Competence in writing were less common than the ability to read. Ralph Hanna argues that “in the Middle Ages vastly more people could read than write.”<sup>3</sup> Reading was taught formally only to wealthy people and families, who could afford it. However, basic skills in reading were spread between most of the population, especially in English and French, out of necessity. Most people would probably not be able to read and understand these more complicated texts, but simpler ones such as those written on walls, shopping lists, and likewise. The question of readership in relation to our specific sources is addressed in the three chapters containing the analysis.

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<sup>1</sup> Hanna, “Literacy, schooling, universities”, 174.

<sup>3</sup> Hanna, “Literacy, schooling, universities”, 173.

<sup>2</sup> Baxter, *Bestiaries and their Users*, 190.

The clergy was central to medieval life. The wilderness was sometimes used in a comparable way as the desert was used by the Christian ascetics. It was used as a place for solitude, meditation, and prayer. Monasteries and chapels were often built in the wilderness as it was seen as a connection to the divine realm. It was God's creation, and not a product of human culture. Therefore, they valued wilderness in a positive religious light.<sup>4</sup> Other parts of the clergy may have had different views on the wilderness which is reflected in the analysed sources.

The timeframe for the thesis is from 1066 to 1400. The year 1066 is selected because it marks the end of Anglo-Saxon England and England's Early Middle Ages. Of course, 1066 was not a complete break with Anglo-Saxon culture, but it was when changes into Anglo-Norman culture started to take root on the isle. The end of the period, 1400 is selected to set an end point to the period studied. It is at the beginning of a change of monarch after the death of Richard II (r. 1377-1399) and allows the inclusion of the *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* romance from the late 14<sup>th</sup> century. With 1066 as the beginning and 1400 as the end of the period studied, the core of English forest legislation of the post-conquest Middle Ages is included. It is within this period then, that the romances and the bestiary is located as well.

Wilderness is the title term. What is meant by wilderness in this thesis is very similar to the typical modern conception of forests. I limit 'wilderness' to the wild, largely wooded, landscape of England. At times, much of this would be considered forest by the legal definition. However, I choose to use 'wilderness' to also consider wild, largely wooded landscape, which was not considered royal forests, the king's forests. A further clarification of this is found in the last section of this introduction chapter.

The thesis fits into environmental history, a relatively new field in historical research. The thesis concerns not so much the climatological and physical environmental aspects as it does the mental constructions, which can be called the environmental-psychological aspects. Several fields of research have attempted to explain the human – nature relationship: evolutionary psychology, environmentalism, evolutionary biology, and social economics.<sup>5</sup> But, the strength of environmental history is its historical context. Defining this relationship historically carries some weight that more contemporary research cannot produce. The time perspective is taken seriously. One thing is defining it as how it is now, in extreme detail, but another thing is considering the possibility that there might have been some historic change or

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<sup>4</sup> Feldt, "Wilderness Mythology in the West", 445.

<sup>5</sup> Valentine, "The Human – Nature Relationship".

consistency to this relationship. In the environmental history field, this relationship has been very little explored in a medieval context compared to more recent historical periods. I hope this thesis might expand the field in this direction.

## STRUCTURE

The three different sources analysed have been given each their own chapter. The first chapter concerns legal sources from the period. It analyses the *Assize of the Forest* of 1184/5 and the *Charter of the Forest*, the 1225 version. The two are compared and placed into the context of their time. Analysis of the two manuscripts in their translated forms form the core of the argument. Each text is taken apart for a thorough analysis of each clause with the research question in mind. The meaning of the laws is not as important as what they tell us about the mentality of their authors and audience in relation to wilderness. There is put more weight on laws that appear to be practical laws, being written based on practical experience rather than legal theory or being based on previous sets of law.

The second kind of source, the bestiary, is analysed and contextualised in the second chapter. It is concentrated on the what the findings might tell us about their relationship with the creatures and their habitat. The analysis is not looking for any presupposed relationships, only the relationships that can be interpreted from the bestiary. Therefore, my own preconceptions are left out to the degree possible. The idea is that the bestiaries might reflect the copyists' and the audience's areas of interest when it comes to animals and mythological beings attributed to the wilderness. If the description of an animal is more weighted towards hunting rather than to theological interpretation, that is probably a reflection of a more common view of the animal. As is often the case in our own time, ancient knowledge manifested in bestiaries might have been recognisable by many of those who have not read it. The fundamental assumption for this chapter is that it is possible to find traces of general perceptions of wild animals in literary texts. The bestiary was not written by peasants. Peasants might still have been influenced by the contents of the bestiary indirectly as they were not literate and would seldom have access to such literary works. This is further elaborated on in the respective chapter.



The third chapter centres around analysis of two romances published in England at two separate points in time during our period: the *Lais of Marie de France* (c. 1170) and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (c. 1400). Again, the contents are analysed with as few preconceptions and expectations as possible to increase the independence of the interpretation from these. However, some historical context to the romances is needed to read it with approximately the same eyes as the original audience would. It is impossible to interpret these fantastical romances in just the same way as the original audience would, but an openness to the perceived reality of the texts is beneficial. We cannot simply assume that the audience or even the author(s) would reject werewolves as pure fantasy. Whether they might have believed in the less convincing concepts or not are important for their utility to this thesis and should therefore be accounted for. This is the most openly interpreted of the three chapters. But its significance is not necessarily lesser.

These three chapters together, are supposed to form as full an image as possible of the relationship people of the period had with forests, both royal and in general terms. The image created is the answer to the thesis question and is put together in the conclusion chapter.

## SIMILAR STUDIES

There have been done several studies on English forests and on the sources that is analysed in this thesis. Law librarian Alison Million stated in her 2018 article on the *Charter of the Forest* that: «In the 13th century trees were a source of timber, fodder and firewood; today we look to them as an essential connection to our environment.»<sup>6</sup> But, is this necessarily the case? I am sure Million did not intend this as a precise generalisation of medieval people's relationship with trees. Million's conclusive argument is not grounded in any evidence provided in the article and the article is not providing any significant new interpretations or findings related to the problem statement in this thesis. It is useful, however, as a starting point for the argument of this thesis. There seems to be a typical preconception that people in the Middle Ages, sometimes until at least the 19<sup>th</sup> century, had a solely pragmatic interpretation of nature. Wilderness was valued only as a source of the materials needed for survival. As argued in this thesis, this is not necessarily completely true.

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<sup>6</sup> Million, "The Forest Charter and the Scribe", 7.

Environmental historian John Robert McNeill (1954-) wrote in 2003 that “political environmental history is almost exclusively modern history” because the time before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, all around the world didn’t have environmental interest groups by the modern definition. He wrote that they are “essentially confined to the era since 1880.”<sup>7</sup> This is a very narrowing view of the past. They might not have had the environmental organisations that is regularly found today, but that does not mean there may not have been forms of interest against the human destruction of nature. Similarly, environmental law professor, Nicholas A. Robinson has suggested the *Charter of the Forest* as among the first statutes of environmental law in history.<sup>8</sup> Proposing this, he is not respecting the historical viewpoint, that environmental protection for the sake of nature might not have been the purpose at the time. The characterisation of forest laws needs to be written with respect to historicism, the viewpoints of the people who lived at the time, not our contemporary viewpoint.

Historian Simon Schama (1945-), specialising in art history among other fields, focused in his 1995 book titled *Landscape and Memory* on human mental relations with nature, that is the wild natural landscape inside of and surrounding human culture. He argues that human-landscape relations have changed throughout history with the evolution of mental images of what the landscape is. Schama points out that wooded landscape in medieval England were seen in a more positive light than they were largely on continental Europe. They were “the place where one found oneself” rather than “the darkling forest where one lost oneself at the entrance to hell.”<sup>9</sup> His scope is much larger than this thesis can have, but generally he addresses the much same problem.

Matt Cartmill (1943-) pointed to in his work *A View to a Death in the Morning: Hunting and Nature Through History* a change in medieval English views on “wilderness”. During the High Middle Ages, the Germanic gloomy and dark view of the wilderness changed into the new idea of the “greenwood”. The greenwood was a more romanticised view seeing the forest as a place where good people live close to nature, as friends of nature, where magic can be observed.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> McNeill, “Observations on the Nature and Culture of Environmental History”, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Robinson, “Evolving Human Rights in Nature”, 63-64.

<sup>9</sup> Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, 141.

<sup>10</sup> Cartmill, *Hunting and Nature Through History*, 75.

In conclusion, there does not seem to have been done more than a few previous studies of the kind, which is done in this thesis, at least in Anglophone academia. Other than the large-scale study by Schama, the closest one might be the book *Forest Folklore, Mythology, and Romance* by Alexander Porteous (1860-?) published in 1928.<sup>11</sup> Porteous was much more general than this thesis, but he analysed Arthurian romances looking for clues to forest myths and legends. Both Schama and Porteous approach the relationships to landscape differently. This thesis is therefore a combination of the works mentioned above, but also contributing something unique with a look different look at the same and similar sources.

## THE ANALYSIS

The primary sources were selected based on availability of translation into English, time of publishing, and how well known they are and were after first publication. Two main literary works are analysed for the law chapter and the romances chapter. For the bestiary category, I consider one central Latin bestiary written in England sufficient as the bestiaries preserved from English High Middle Ages are very similar with few differences.<sup>12</sup> These differences are not significant enough to have an impact on the thesis large enough to alter the conclusion of the chapter on bestiaries. For the chapter on law, two main works form the centre of the analysis: the *Assize of the Forest* and the later *Charter of the Forest*. With their considerable impact on forest legislation in England at the time, they are the most significant collections of forest laws from the English High Middle Ages. The two romances analysed in the third chapter are: *The Lais of Marie de France* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. They are and were both well-known romances from the period of this thesis. Both are mythological in the sense that they include mythological beings, as is the case with the bestiary as well. I consider it important to include mythological entities and stories in this analysis as they form a portion of the mental relationship people might have had with wilderness. A more detailed introduction to these sources follows in the respective chapters.

As the second question asked of the sources: Which social groups does the sources reflect the relationship with wilderness of? The answers determine who were influenced by them directly and who's perceptions they reflected. The contents of the sources can be

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<sup>11</sup> Porteous, *Forest Folklore, Mythology, and Romance*.

<sup>12</sup> Crane, "A Taxonomy", 6-7.

interpreted in two general ways: how they reflect the views of the time, and how they influenced the views of the time. Indirectly, a much broader audience must be considered as well. This question forms part of the analysis as it is necessary to answer the question of what kinds of views the sources reflect. It indicates how much we can conclude from the analysis of the works and who's perspectives are reflected. This question of readership and influence is addressed more specifically in the respective chapters. The spreading of knowledge of the contents of the literature through direct reading or indirectly hearing about their contents or having the texts read out loud to illiterate audiences are common to all the works analysed. Direct reading would only be available to literate people, while indirect understanding would theoretically be available to all inhabitants of England at the time.

The animals of the forest, as well as the plants of the forest, have been subject to philosophical and pre-scientific scrutiny throughout the Classical world and the Middle Ages. Development in the views on animals might have been related to developing views on plants. Animals are as much a part of the forests as the plants and the area itself; therefore, they are necessary to the analysis. They are also described in more detail than their surroundings, probably due to their central interest among humans compared to the more taken-for-granted plant life. Animals are the dominating topic of the bestiaries and are largely involved in the romances. The term 'animal' is, in this thesis, used in a broader sense than usual. It is used in the medieval sense, which includes all beings that are animated, including humans and werewolves. The animals of the sea and rivers are not discussed as they are largely a separate world by themselves. The wilderness in this thesis is the largely wooded wilderness as is clarified below.

The relationship peasants had with wilderness is not possible to directly interpret from analysis of these sources. Their view is always problematic to say something for certain about. The best I can do with the sources is to interpret the relationship the aristocracy had with wilderness. From there it can be speculated on what this would probably mean the peasants' views were. They lived in the same natural environment and would therefore probably have much of the same experiences of it. They lived in the same places and related to the same wilderness that the aristocracy did. This, of course, is informed speculation, that can be valuable if treated as what it is. I will not attempt to say anything for certain about peasants' relationships with the wilderness.

The analysis method is relatively loose. It takes into consideration all the above and keeps to the time and area of focus. Besides, it is an open analysis of the texts selected, open to whatever can be interpreted and deduced from the texts. A benefit of such an open analysis is that it might reduce the confirmation bias. The texts are analysed with an open mind, not strictly adhering to a certain model of interpretation. This is an attempt to read the texts with a clear mind, of course taking into consideration the known patterns of thought at the time. An organisation of the findings is provided by the subchapters in each chapter, briefly answering the thesis question in relation to each of the three categories of literary works.

## PROBLEMATIC DEFINITIONS

The most important thing to determine for this thesis is the meaning of the words forest, wilderness, and woodland (woods). How the terms were used in the sources analysed in this thesis, is part of the analysis, so this definition clarifies the definitions used in the analysis itself. Different authors use the terms differently. It seems common to use the three interchangeably. As the central topic of this thesis is wilderness, it is necessary to clarify the difference between the three as they are used here. Wilderness is used to term land that is mostly not cultivated by humans. It can be hunting parks where trees are planted, since the ground is not worked to the same degree as done in agriculture. In the analysis, ‘forest’ is used to separate the legally designated areas regulated by forest law from the more general wilderness. Woods are more clearly defined as land where trees grow to form what would normally be considered a forest or woodland. ‘Forest’ is also often used as a synonym to ‘wilderness’. Authors such as Simon Schama uses ‘forest’ by its legal definition, but also to explain the same as wilderness does.<sup>13</sup> In this thesis, that interchangeable use of the terms is avoided to the extent possible to make the argument clearer.

Besides the definitions used in this thesis, it is necessary to provide a deeper understanding of the differences in terming types of land. What is the difference between forest or wilderness and land domesticated by humans? There are many opinions on the difference in modern times. William Cronon (1954-) defined wilderness as completely untouched by human hands.<sup>14</sup> Nature is often referred to as what is not human.<sup>15</sup> That is a very strict definition. A

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<sup>13</sup> Schama, *Landscape and Memory*.

<sup>14</sup> Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness.”

<sup>15</sup> Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses.”, 209; Crutzen, “Geology of Mankind”, 23.

very real thought experiment might make clear which stance I take in this thesis: In an imagined forest, an old ruined medieval castle once stood. Now there are only ruins left, barely larger than a tall bush. It is almost completely covered in undergrowth, bushes, and trees. One would have to cut down most of it, re-establish a functioning road, and rebuild the settlement to a suitable standard again for it to be a functioning human settlement. If not, it would at best function as a temporary bandit camp or hideout. If this is not done, I would consider the area wilderness, or woodland if dense with trees. It would not matter if most of the trees were initially planted. The area is clearly more suitable for wild animals than it is for humans to thrive in. Therefore, the difference made between wild and cultivated land is that wild is not or almost not regulated by human hands on a regular basis, while cultivated land is regularly regulated by human hands.

# CHAPTER ONE:

## WILDERNESS IN FOREST LAW

### CONCERNING MEDIEVAL ENGLISH RELATIONSHIPS WITH WILDERNESS REFLECTED IN FOREST LAW.

#### INTRODUCTION

Forest law was a separate section of law, often treated in its own code of law. These law codes regulated the use of forests, more specifically king's forests. As discussed in the introduction, forests can be defined either as woodland itself, or as land of all kinds, cultivated or not, reserved by law for the preservation of wild animal game. The *Assize of the Forest* (1184) and the *Charter of the Forest* (1225), also called the *Forest Charter*, are the two foundational sets of forest law in post-Conquest England. It is worth mentioning that the legally regulated royal forests of England were not unique to England. The history of forests as a seigneurial or royal hunting ground goes back to at least the Frankish period (481-840) in Europe. In Germany and Austria, the legally protected forests were called *Bannwald*. Their definition and meaning has changed over time, but like the English forests, there are still significant remains. In France, the royal and seigneurial forests had been in place since at least the end of the Western Roman Empire, probably earlier in Celtic culture.<sup>1</sup> Inevitably, forests in England would have been of a different nature due to its different history.

In this chapter, the medieval English relationship with forests is explored by analysis of legal material from the post-conquest High Middle Ages of England (1066-1272). The nature of and developments of forest laws are the focus of the analysis. However, what is connecting the analysis to the central question of the thesis is the mentalities reflected in the text. The central documents analysed here are the so-called *Assize of the Forest*, and the *Charter of the Forest*. All clauses which seem relevant to the analysis are analysed, the others are left out. Notice that it is the 1225 edition of the *Forest Charter* that is analysed as it is the

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<sup>1</sup> Braunstein, "Forêts d'Europe", 3.

copy that was used from that point on. They are all the centrepieces of medieval forest law in England. Other legal and non-legal related documents are also included in the analysis for further details and understanding of the core sources. Legal history is used to analyse the overarching legal regulations of the English forests. The different sets of laws reflect the perspectives of different parts of society. Laws are seldom written out of nowhere. Some forms of experience are found in the foundation of new or adjusted laws. However, this one perspective should be tested by looking through some other lenses. The reasons why different laws were written as they were might require other perspectives, including political history, religious and mental history, and archaeological surveys. These perspectives are only supplementary to the legal history as anything more would require a much longer paper. The analysis is largely limited to the central sources with only some supplementary sources. I do not think this will severely limit the quality of the analysis with the thesis question in mind. These sources should suffice to establish a well-founded image of relations to the forests.

In interpreting laws such as these, it is important to keep in mind that laws are largely reactionary in some sense. They are made as a reaction to certain events or trends, called 'reactionary legislation' in law. If it never happened that people besides the king hunted wild game, it would not be necessary to make a law prohibiting it and defining it specifically as poaching. Many laws are directly or indirectly derived from earlier or ancient law codes. However, circumstances and the culture developed from it seems to lay the foundation for completely or partially independently invented laws. They are certainly made as a reaction to events or tendencies, as we will see from the analysis. Both the *Assize of the Forest* and the *Charter of the Forest* were written and made official because of circumstance: The *Assize* probably following a sense of need by Henry II (r. 1154-1189) to strengthen his legal grip on his forests to raise revenue and safeguard hunting privileges; the *Forest Charter* following the opposition by the barons, representative of the lands they ruled in the king's stead against the king.

Whose relationship to forests does the laws reflect? Initially, it might seem the only relationships they reflect are those of the authors, directly or indirectly. However, the laws themselves might reflect the wills of all those who were involved in the events or tendencies that influenced the law-making leading to the writing of these laws. The relationships reflected in the laws can be said to be that of the reactionaries (the lawmakers) and the catalysts (the initiators of the process). The catalysts can be any section of the population trying to live to



their own interest as best they can. The reactionaries react to these actions either by accepting them, ignoring them, or acting against them by producing new regulations.

The forest law system was established between 1066 and the writing of the *Assize of the Forest* around 1184. It was Norman in nature and heritage, being established by William the Conqueror and further developed by his successors. Before doing the analysis of the two central sources of forest law, the foundation period of forest law, between the conquest and the *Assize of the Forest* is useful to include for context.

In this period, until about the time of the *Magna Carta* (1215), forest law was under development by the whim of the king. Under William I (r. 1066-1087), large portions of the land in England were designated as royal forests. The largest areas placed under forest law regulation was in Hampshire (New Forest), Wiltshire, Dorset, Nottighamshire (Sherwood Forest), Essex and Somerset. For the king, the forests were sources of food and timber, leading to a relatively high income from these areas directly to the crown. To get rights to graze animals or cut down trees in the forest, one had to pay forest taxes going to the king. The forest law system was gradually developing during the time between the conquest and the *Assize of the Forest* into a more and more rigid system of laws concerning the most minute details of forest concerns.<sup>2</sup> The royal forest was the king's domain and strict laws prohibited uncontrolled use of the royal forests.

The forest laws prior to the *Charter of the Forest*, were unpredictable and harsh to the population. The fines for breaching forest law were high. Therefore, the king sustained strong criticism and resentment, especially among those who lived on land restricted by forest law. According to Richard Huscroft, the forest was a "constant reminder of the power of the king." Animal game, small and large were not legally available unless one had the permission of the king. However, small game, such as hare and pheasant, was frequently allowed to be hunted. Generally, none but the king, his foresters and occasionally favoured subjects were allowed to hunt large game such as deer and boar. Discontent with these forest laws in England resulted in the writing of the *Charter of the Forest* which altered the nature of forest laws.<sup>3</sup> The forest

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<sup>2</sup> Huscroft, *The Norman Conquest*, 206.

<sup>3</sup> *The Oxford Companion to British History*, s.v. "Forest Laws," by S. D. Lloyd, 02.06.2022. [https://www-oxfordreference-](https://www-oxfordreference-com.ezproxy.uio.no/view/10.1093/acref/9780199677832.001.0001/acref-9780199677832-e-1706?rskey=1LKgtj&result=1701)

[com.ezproxy.uio.no/view/10.1093/acref/9780199677832.001.0001/acref-9780199677832-e-1706?rskey=1LKgtj&result=1701](https://www-oxfordreference-com.ezproxy.uio.no/view/10.1093/acref/9780199677832.001.0001/acref-9780199677832-e-1706?rskey=1LKgtj&result=1701)

laws were now more weighted towards the aristocracy and their subjects, and less towards the king.

## THE LEGAL FOREST

[...] a safe refuge for wild beasts; not every kind of beast, but those that live in woods; not in any kind of place, but in selected spots, suitable for the purpose. Wherefore such a place is called “foresta”, as it were “feresta”, that is, an abode for wild beasts, the “e” in “foresta” being changed into an “o”.<sup>4</sup>

Such is ‘royal forest’, or ‘the king’s forest’ defined in the *Dialogue of the Exchequer*, the royal treasurer of post-conquest England. According to the translator, it was most likely finished in 1179 by Richard fitz Nigel, (c. 1130-1198), the royal exchequer, treasurer of royal finance, having been written since 1177. The translator points out that the etymological explanation is “of course, absurd”.<sup>5</sup> Despite the erroneous etymology, the passage clarifies what was likely officially meant by “royal forest” in England after the Norman Conquest. The definition refers to a pragmatic view on the royal forest and its functions. It is there to preserve and produce wild beasts for the king and a selection of his subjects to hunt. From this can be derived that the monarch’s relationship with nature was pragmatic rather than sentimental or spiritual. The definition of a royal forest found in the *Dialogue of the Exchequer* aligns well with the modern *Oxford English Dictionary* definition.

2. Law. A woodland district, usually belonging to the king, set apart for hunting wild beasts and game, etc. ...; having special laws and officers of its own.<sup>6</sup>

The English “Forest” was a different entity in the Middle Ages than we normally see it in our contemporary world. The definition of forest in medieval England was more based on legal terms than how we normally categorise by the degree to which an area is woodland. The medieval English definition of forests seem to have been the royally owned land of the king for the ‘cultivation’ of animal game. The royal forest did not only consist of woodland, but of fields, clearings, hills, villages, and rivers as well. The requirement was that the area was suited

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<sup>4</sup> fitz Nigel, *Dialogue of the Exchequer*, 528.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas and Greenaway, *English Historical Documents*, 528.

<sup>6</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “forest”. March 2022.

<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/73187?rskey=kTIYrj&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>

for animal game living there. A forest was an area which was regulated by forest law, the law that ensured the conservation of the hunting grounds of the monarch. For deer and other game to thrive, they would need nourishing land to live off. Therefore, if people exploited the land too much, the deer and other game would not thrive and so the king would not have the amount of available game to hunt he wanted. The forests of England were the king's hunting grounds. As legally defined, "forests" contained woodland, marshland, fields, and hills.<sup>7</sup> Just as the regular English natural landscape we see today. In this chapter, the legal definition of forests will be used primarily. 'Woodland' is used for wooded areas.

English forest law after 1066 began with William I the Conqueror. The first Norman king of England brought from Normandy the tradition of strict preservation of forest land to allow for good hunting opportunities following his conquest of England in 1066. In Normandy, the dukes had the regulating power over their own lordly (seigneurial) rather than royal forests and hunting grounds. When conquering England, this tradition combined with his will to have access to animal game, meant that as much as he could manage of English uncultivated soil would fall under forest law. William I's love for the hunt have been expressed in the Peterborough and Canterbury version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.<sup>8</sup> The Peterborough version describes his obsession with a poem. He "took [woodlands] by weight and with great injustice from his people with little need for such a deed."<sup>9</sup> The poem expresses king William I's attitudes towards hunting, which played a significant part in establishing forest laws in the way they were. It followed the establishment of royal forests after the annexation of the forfeited lands of the previous lords of the land. Evidently, it was put in motion and enforced heavily to protect wildlife from unregulated exploitation by the king's subjects. Laws were put in place to ensure the health of the king's hunting grounds.

Both law codes are referred to in the footnotes using clauses. The translation spans only two and three pages. Therefore, it was considered most applicable to refer to the clauses rather than the page number of the translation.

## THE ASSIZE OF THE FOREST

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<sup>7</sup> Birrell, "The Medieval English Forest", 1-2.

<sup>8</sup> Douglas and Greenaway, *EHD II: 1042-1189*, 108.

<sup>9</sup> *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, version E, 164.

The most significant set of forest laws from the early period of the English High Middle Ages is the *Assize of the Forest*. It is also known as the *Assize of Woodstock*, as it seems to have been worked out at a council there in 1184, under the rule of king Henry II. It is the first known official act of legislation relating exclusively to forest in post-Conquest England. It is a summary of previous laws and what is likely a few new additions that was decided at the council.<sup>10</sup> It consists of “restatements or modifications of earlier decrees, and some, especially article 12, seems to be additions formulated at Woodstock in 1184.”<sup>11</sup> Therefore, it might serve as an insight into the forest laws up until the *Charter of the Forest*, which altered English forest regulation.

*The Assize of the Forest* was part of Henry II’s ambitious project to make sure his forest assets were protected as much as was possible.<sup>12</sup> The place of the meeting that resulted in the *Assize* was a “major royal hunting lodge for the midlands”, the place called Woodstock.<sup>13</sup> It was written by the initiative of Henry II.

The *Assize* is valuable to this analysis as it summarised and updated forest laws from 1066 to 1184. Therefore, it reflects some of the attitudes among lawmakers in the period. This includes the king, barons, and forest officials. As the laws are, to a degree, reactionary, they might reflect the wishes and views of the lawmakers’ subjects as well. It will be representative of relationships to forests and woodland between the Norman Conquest and the signing of the *Charter of the Forest*. It also includes the forest laws that was continued past the *Charter of the Forest*. Combining it with the *Charter* in this analysis provides a broad picture of the forest laws of post-Conquest England, which is effective for this thesis.

## THE CHARTER OF THE FOREST

The *Charter of the Forest* was first signed in 1217, two years after the signing of the *Magna Carta* and 33 years after the writing of the *Assize of the Forest*. It was made as a supplement to the *Magna Carta* for its lack of adjustments to forest law following ensuing

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<sup>10</sup> *The Oxford Companion to British History*, s.v. "Forest Laws,". 2015. <https://www-oxfordreference-com.ezproxy.uio.no/view/10.1093/acref/9780199677832.001.0001/acref-9780199677832-e-1706?rskey=wC6aqQ&result=1701>

<sup>11</sup> Douglas and Greenaway, *EHD II: 1042-1189*, 417.

<sup>12</sup> Green, “Forest Laws in England”, 429.

<sup>13</sup> Cook, *New Forest*, 100.

discontent with the forest laws in the form in which they were written in the *Assize of Woodstock*. The *Charter of the Forest* was signed as a remedy during the early years of king Henry III' reign. The nature of the discontent can be derived partly from what the charter changed in forest law. The *Charter of the Forest* should, according to its history, reflect the views of the barons and possibly, to some extent, their subjects, and not only the king's view on forest land. It represents a combination of the views of the royal power and its subjects. It is therefore a valuable source to the attitudes to forests and wilderness that followed its official signing. It might have contributed to forming relationships to forests and wilderness.

The 1225 edition of the *Charter of the Forest* is the one primarily analysed. It is the edition that was referred to when the charter was confirmed and renewed in later years in royal statutes. Therefore, it is the most relevant edition with the most impact despite only minute changes from the 1217 edition.

The *Charter of the Forest* was in a sense a reaction to the *Assize* by the complaints by the barons. It invalidated several of the laws found in the *Assize* and a variety of practices connected to the forests in England. More people were able to do more things in the forests, mainly to gather more of the resources they needed. Rights to make use of and travel through forests were enhanced.<sup>14</sup> It declared a certain extent of disafforestation, meaning the reversal of earlier declarations of land as part of the royal forest, releasing them from direct forest regulation. Already in the first paragraph, the charter declares a disafforestation of some of the woods afforested by Henry II. In the third paragraph, a disafforestation was declared of the land that was afforested by King Richard Lionheart (r. 1189-1199) and by King John (r. 1199-1216), unless it was woodland already in crown ownership. Disafforestations are not found in the *Assize of the Forest* at all. At the time of the writing of the *Assize*, the king was in a much stronger position than during the writing of the Forest Charter and the closely related *Magna Carta*. These are probably the most explicit differences, making the nature of the Forest Charter largely different. This would make the forest more available to more people. It is thinkable then that the Forest Charter started changing the views of many on forests. Forests might have been seen less as an exclusively royal domain where trespassing were severely punished, to a place where freedom could be exercised to a larger extent.

The impact of the barons' interests is significant. It is clearly written in their interest to balance the king's privileges with their own. In addition, the importance of disafforestation in

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<sup>14</sup> Van Bueren QC, "Magna Carta's Sister", 200.

the Forest Charter can be interpreted as high because of its primacy, being first mentioned. It can therefore be interpreted from this that the extent of land regulated by forest law was high on the barons' list of aggravations.

## THE KING'S FOREST

Probably as much as one third of England were made royal forest during William I's reign.<sup>15</sup> After the Conquest, all parts of England conquered by William would be considered his land. The holding of the land was delegated to the subjects that he saw fit. They would second-hand rule the land for the king. However, the royal forests had its own judicial system and were separately ruled. Transgressions of forest law would be judged by the king, however, not always personally. Even barons and others of the aristocracy and high clergy could be punished for forest transgressions, especially before the beginning of the thirteenth century.<sup>16</sup> The judicial system of forest law was populated by forest officials who received delegated power by the king to implement forest law. They were the foresters, verderers, and other titular officials. The courts of England at the time, the hundred court, the shire or county court, the episcopal courts, and the royal court did not have judicial power in forest matters. Forest law was a judicial system separated from the Common Law of England and only governed by the king himself, although this power was delegated by necessity.<sup>17</sup>

Forest law was enforced by a hierarchical network of different delegates of the king, directly and indirectly. The supervisors of the royal forests were among the most important new categories of officials following the Norman Conquest.<sup>18</sup> On local level, there were foresters walking or riding around the forests they were responsible for. They would preferably catch transgressors of forest law in the act, on areas regulated by forest law. This hierarchy of forest officials is too complicated and unnecessary to map out in detail here, so the approximate shape of it suffices. On local level were the foresters. They were first and foremost meant to take care for the practical details of the forest conservation. Above the foresters were foresters-in-fee. They again served forest wardens or keepers who had the overarching legal responsibility over a forest. The verderers and regards were elected in the county court. Directly under the king was the royal forest justices. The seriousness with which forest law

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<sup>15</sup> Baker, *Introduction to English Legal History*, 15.

<sup>16</sup> *Assize of the Forest*, clause 2.

<sup>17</sup> fitz Nigel, *Dialogue of the Exchequer*, 527-528.

<sup>18</sup> Huscroft, *The Norman Conquest*, 204.

was enforced and organised reflects how much it meant for the crown to control and optimise those lands for royal benefit.

Until the *Charter of the Forest*, the monarch had complete theoretical power over forest law. It was the monarch's law. The punishments were for transgressions of forest law during the time of king Henry II seem to have been moderated slightly, but they were always at the king's mercy. There is only one paragraph in the *Assize of the Forest* that we can say with near certainty that was new following the meeting at Woodstock. It explicitly says: "At Woodstock the king commanded [...]". It regulated the conditions for punishment in relation to forest law. A first and second transgression were to be paid for by a pledge of a sort to the king. A third transgression would legally lead to the execution of the convict.<sup>19</sup> The severity of the punishment for transgressions of forest law indicates the perceived severity of destruction of forests among the monarchs and their courts. The severity of a crime can often be measured by the severity of the punishment. There seems that at least at the time of the *Assize of the Forest*, the punishment for any forest transgression would be what was stated in the paragraph referred to above. It indicates that they believed in a form of second chance to become lawful. However, the necessity for the use of forest land for survival might for some have forced them to transgress these forest laws at times.

Additionally, every male coming of age (at the age of 12), and clergy who lived on forest land would have to "swear to keep the king's peace".<sup>20</sup> This oath might have been similar in nature to that of the knights in each county throughout the Middle Ages in England. If this is the case, each male and cleric living in a forest law regulated area would be obliged by oath to assist in policing the area for the king and abstain from breaking the king's peace. This would probably make the policing role of the forester far easier if truly practiced by the oath givers. The requirement would ensure that everyone living on forest land would be accustomed to forest law and the limits it set on their behaviour. They would be aware of the consequences of breaking any of those laws, likely making them very respecting of the surrounding nature, forced or not. This is assuming they generally were too afraid to risk breaking forest law.

The *Assize of the Forest* points out that an owner of woodland in the territory regulated by forest law must have a forester to guard it.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, it seems it was up to local landowners to select foresters to guard their areas of the king's forests. This reflects the

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<sup>19</sup> *Assize of the Forest*, clause 12.

<sup>20</sup> *Assize of the Forest*, clause 13.

<sup>21</sup> *Assize of the Forest*, clause 4.

delegated responsibility for the king's forests down to local level. The landowners had to respect forest law while also being part of the forest law system. The monarch did not decide every detail. The local lords might have had a sense of responsibility towards the royal forests, in theory respecting them as the king's property under their protection. This is not changed in the *Charter of the Forest*.

The foresters were not given complete confidence by the monarch. According to the *Assize*, if parts of a forest are destroyed without the forester providing a "just cause" for its reasons, the forester's person and "not something else" were to be seized.<sup>22</sup> The most likely interpretation of "just cause" (Latin: *justam causam*) seems to be that the cause provided by the forester should be justly arrived at, not simply blaming somebody without evidence. The punishment on the forester is harsh for destruction of forest, whether it being his imprisonment or his execution. It is suggestable that it would be up to the king or the forest justice to determine what the exact punishment would be. However, this points to the serious nature of forest laws by laying pressure on the foresters to take their role seriously. They were not trusted, reflecting the monarch's concern for misuse of the royal forests by those trusted with its care and protection.

For further control, it is added that the king required that all men summoned by the master forester must meet. If they are not able for reasonable causes, the meeting was supposed to be transacted to a county court, most likely the one in the area where the relevant forest was located. Those who did not meet would, legally, have been judged by the king's arbitrary judgement.<sup>23</sup> As this is targeted at all men, seemingly indifferent to status, it would also be the case for the higher status lords of the land. As we will see going forward in time, this regulation would not be popular among the elite, being changed in the *Charter of the Forest*. However, according to the introduction to the *Assize*, the barons officially agreed to it. On the other side, they might not have had much of a choice or even the detailed knowledge of the effects of the regulations at the time of writing. However, it reflects the king's will to use as much as he could of his power to discourage anyone from escaping justice according to forest law.

The *Charter of the Forest* declared invalid any breaks of the law within royal forests owned by any free person defined as "essarts", "wastes", or "encroachments" (trespassing) made between the first coronation of Henry II (1154) and the beginning of 1217.<sup>24</sup> The free

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<sup>22</sup> *Assize of the Forest*, clause 8.

<sup>23</sup> *Assize of the Forest*, clause 11.

<sup>24</sup> *Charter of the Forest*, clause 4.



persons owning land in forest land were “archbishops, bishops, abbots, priors, earls, barons, knights and freeholders”. They were those who generally owned land in England, except for the king. “Essarts” are defined as the clearing of land to make space for arable land.<sup>25</sup> This seems to have meant that these breaks of the law in the time before the charter was written, would be overlooked. After this, such breaks of the law would thereafter again be punishable. This declaration might have been intended as a relief for the dissatisfied barons, making up for the harsh laws that had applied to them since at least the middle of the twelfth century. The clause empathises what was the important typical crimes of landowners in forests. It reflects a concern with the health of the land, likely to ensure optimal hunting-condition.

From *Forest Charter*, it seems there was a hierarchy when it came to “pleas of forest” in cases of infringement, breaking forest law. The forester was supposed to report to the verderers, who discussed the case before transferring it to the chief foresters who were to hold pleas of forest when he arrived in the area. The local castellans, the governor of a castle, were exempt from this responsibility.<sup>26</sup> The wording indicates that before the *Charter of the Forest* was written, the local castellans were expected to hold the pleas of forests. However, this is not confirmed directly in the *Assize*.<sup>27</sup> It must have taken some time then for the pleas to be concluded when the local castellan could no longer treat them. This might be a sign of the seriousness of pleas of forest in cases of infringement, as the castellans were not authorised to treat them. This complex judicial system reflects the seriousness with which breakings of forest law was reacted upon by the monarch. The monarch wanted to protect his forests with as much power as was necessary, probably to the dissatisfaction of the rest of the population. Everyone wanted to have access to the forest, but only a few did, legally.

## HUNTING

Both the *Assize of the Forest* and the *Charter of the Forest* treat hunting rights and restrictions. To reduce the chances that anyone would fall for the temptation to hunt in the king’s forest, the means to hunt were not permitted to be brought into the forest. Such means were, according to the *Assize*: bows, arrows, dogs, and harriers (either a hunting dog or a kind of hunting hawk).<sup>28</sup> In practice, this would have made the foresters’ catching of potential

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<sup>25</sup> fitz Nigel, *Dialogue of the Exchequer*, 528

<sup>26</sup> *Charter of the Forest*, clause 16.

<sup>27</sup> *Assize of the Forest*.

<sup>28</sup> *Assize of the Forest*, clause 2.

poachers easier. Catching a person with a bow and not necessarily with poached game would be enough evidence for the forester to bring the person to justice. The exception, of course, would be if a person had obtained permission by the king or someone with whom the king had shared that power, to hunt in the royal forest. The means to hunt were enough to charge a person for breaking forest law. The freedom experienced by people in relation to forests was limited.

Another limitation on the means to hunt was the required “mutilation” of dogs who are likely to attack the king’s wild animals, those who live in the forest areas. “Mutilation” is very general, but it is reasonable to assume that in the *Assize of the Forest* it meant the removal of the claws or even teeth of dogs.<sup>29</sup> In the *Charter of the Forest*, the “mutilation” is more clearly defined: “three claws of the forefoot are to be cut off, but not the ball.”<sup>30</sup> It is probably a reaction to the vague meaning of “mutilation” in the *Assize*, exchanging it with the more clearly defined word “expeditated”, meaning the above, in the same clauses. The treatment of dogs in relation to forests was made milder, reflecting concern among dog-owners and the king’s wish to make sure that no unauthorised dogs could be used for poaching, illegal hunting.

According to the *Assize of the Forest*, tanners and bleachers of hide were not allowed to live in forest-law regulated areas.<sup>31</sup> One possible reason for this could be that with a tanner living in the forest, illegal hunting would be easier as they would potentially be able to make a product out of the animal to rid themselves of the most obvious evidence for their own or others crime. The *Charter of the Forest* do not express any change in this regulation, probably maintaining its function. These regulations would in theory help reduce the number of animals illegally hunted, further protecting the animal game for the king and those the privilege of hunting was distributed to.

A special punishment was set in place by the *Assize* for those found guilty of hunting at night or obstructing the paths of the king’s wild animals, both within and outside the royal forests. They would need to face a penalty of one year imprisonment, plus a fine.<sup>32</sup> In addition to being a special penalty for such minor offences, it seems the king’s wild animals would be under his ownership also when wandering outside the forest law regulated areas. How the king’s animals would be distinguished from animals of the same kind not in his ownership is unclear. One possibility is that all animals of the kinds under the king’s ownership would be his property throughout England, not only in his forests. The forests would then be their

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<sup>29</sup> *Assize of the Forest*, clause 14.

<sup>30</sup> *Charter of the Forest*, clause 6.

<sup>31</sup> *Assize of the Forest*, clause 15.

<sup>32</sup> *Assize of the Forest*, clause 16.

designated home, while the rest of England would be open to them as a matter of course. Need for control over nature and its animals is expressed. The monarch wanted as much control as he could over his vert and venison, the forests' plant life and its animals. The animal game was to be left in peace and respected until being hunted.

The *Charter of the Forest* softened the punishments for hunting seen in the *Assize*. The punishment for being caught hunting was not any longer the loss of limb or life, but by payment of a ransom, a fine. If a ransom was not paid, the convict was to be sentenced to prison for one year and a day. After this had been served, the prisoner would have to “find sureties”, probably meaning that the convicted would have to find someone to guarantee continued good behaviour for a time after the completed sentence. If not, it would be up to the “realm” to decide his or her fate, probably one of the courts of justice working for the realm.<sup>33</sup> This indicates a reduction in the severity of sentences made upon those convicted of hunting in the royal forest, which is similar to much of the other content of this charter and the *Magna Carta*. In other words, they reduced the seriousness of the crime of poaching. On another note, the *Forest Charter* allowed an “archbishop, bishop, earl or baron” to hunt up to two game animals, either in view of a forester or by blowing a horn to signal their action.<sup>34</sup> Seeing that the charter was made primarily to benefit the higher status landowners in England and reduce the power of the king, they managed to bring through their wishes for a more balanced policy regarding the access to the royal forests. This could mean that the forests would have more actors exploiting it, but that conclusion depends on many more factors than this text allows. However, interest in the unhindered use of forests seems to have been present in everyone. Therefore, the balance of power in the realm would determine the balance of power in the royal forest laws.

## PASTURE

Forest law regulated areas were also used as pasture for a few kinds of animals including cattle, pigs, and in a sense, bees. The European pig found in England in our period was different than the usually originally Chinese heavy pig lying in barns since it was imported during the seventeenth century. For the medieval pig, more hog-like, woodland was necessary as pasture as it ate nuts and other foods lying on the ground.<sup>35</sup> The pasture of domestic animals

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<sup>33</sup> *Charter of the Forest*, clause 10.

<sup>34</sup> *Charter of the Forest*, clause 11.

<sup>35</sup> White, “From Globalized Pig Breeds to Capitalist Pigs”, 112.

such as cattle or swine in the forest was generally not allowed. However, four appointed knights in each county were legally supposed to graze cattle in the very specific period between the fourteenth of September and the fourteenth of October. This might be due to the prioritisation of available food suited for animal game. By autumn, most of the plants have been allowed to grow to full size and number before the winter months set in. Outside of grazing, there were supposed to be a group of twelve knights in each county who were meant to guard “the right to pannage” (the right to pasture animals in the king’s woods). Otherwise, grazing was allowed on land in the forest law regulated areas previously made into a pasture.<sup>36</sup> This acts as a confirmation that there were differences between “natural” land and cultivated land in a royal forest at the time. In relation to the thesis, the regulation reflects evidence for a view among owners of pigs and by landowners including the king that the wilderness was a place of pasture for some domestic animals.

It seems every free man could bring his pigs through his own and the king’s woods without hinderance. He would be allowed to spend a night in it without any legal consequences.<sup>37</sup> One interpretation of this might be that they didn’t see the exploitation of forests by pigs as damaging enough to the other livestock and wild animal game that they would need stricter regulations. The explanation might lay in their diet. Referring to the dictionary interpretation of the word pannage, pigs ate, or were allowed to eat, nuts such as acorns and beech mast.<sup>38</sup> If hogs kept to such a diet, deer would probably not have any difficulty finding food because of the hogs feeding off the forest. This regulation is set as it is based on knowledge related to the specific nature of exploitation by different animals. Since hogs would not damage the forests enough that the wild animals would suffer for it, they were allowed to exploit it according to their needs. This probably increased a sense of freedom to spend time in royal forests for those needing to move with pigs across the land.

For forest land that had been cleared for other purposes such as pasture, agriculture, or buildings, it was expected by law that it could be documented. Documentation was required whether the land was cleared legally or not.<sup>39</sup> Such documentation would be useful for the forest officials to judge cases and otherwise have a certain control over the forest areas and their eventual developments. As with the other regulations of the *Assize*, this requirement

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<sup>36</sup> *Assize of the Forest*, clause 7.

<sup>37</sup> *Charter of the Forest*, clause 9.

<sup>38</sup> “Pannage”, March 2022. <https://www-oed-com.ezproxy.uio.no/view/Entry/136887?redirectedFrom=pannage#eid>

<sup>39</sup> *Assize of the Forest*, clause 10.

indicates the projected importance of regulation of forest land to the king and his relationship with the rest of the realm. He demanded detailed control over land regulated by forest law for the protection of his animal game.

There was supposed to be held no more than three “swanimotes” (forest courts) each year from the implementation of the *Forest Charter*. The first was to be held during the second half of September. Then the agisters, officials of the royal forest who are responsible for allowing the use of land for pasture, were expected to attend. Later, around the feast of St. Martin (11. November), the agisters were supposed to receive the rights to graze pigs on acorns and beech mast, delegating that right in the counties. Pigs were in a sense allowed to consume consumables that humans and most animal game could not consume. This points to their value to human society at the time. The third meeting was supposed to occur in the days following the ninth of June, when only the foresters and verderers would be involved. The swinemoots were not to be held in new places, only where they had been regularly held since before the charter.<sup>40</sup> The swinemoots seem to have been meetings concerned with the accounting and control of what the forests in different counties contained and how it should be exploited. The continuation of the “swanimotes” were concerned with the annual necessity of allowing swine to pasture in forests, indicating the degree of necessity applied to pasture of swine among inhabitants of royal forests. The wording of the clause indicates that this law mildens and simplifies the previous procedure and expectations of the swinemoots. A mildening likely meant there had been some discontent with the previous norm or law, indicating a wish among the population to gain easier access to pasture in royal forests.

## NATURAL RESOURCES

The *Assize* legally protected land under forest law from being “wasted”, that is, being used as a source of resources for trade or to clear new land. However, it seems use of woodland in royal forests for subsistence level extractions of resources was acceptable. According to clause three of the *Assize of the Forest*, people were allowed to take only what was fundamentally necessary for them if it could be done without waste.<sup>41</sup> The *Dialogue of the Exchequer* provides a more precise definition of “waste” that might make its meaning clearer. The fitz Nigel defined “waste” in relation to forest law as: “the groves are cut down in such a

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<sup>40</sup> *Charter of the Forest*, clause 8.

<sup>41</sup> *Assize of the Forest*, clause 3.

way that anyone, standing and leaning against the stump of an oak or other tree that has been felled, can, as he looks around, see five others that have been cut down”.<sup>42</sup> In short, if interpreted as intended, a “waste” is the cutting of 6 trees near enough to each other that they are all visible from each other. This seems to hint at the form of cutting wood where one takes out one tree here and there in a large area, rather than taking out a group of trees standing relatively close to each other. In this sense, it seems the taking out of single trees was allowed if needed for subsistence, but any extent of clearing the land was prohibited. This reflects a certain extent of freedom to people who subsided on forest law regulated land. The woods were areas where the necessary resources to light fires and eat enough to survive could be gathered despite it being protected.

The legal restriction against wasting the forest reflects a concern that the forests might be cleared too much if people were allowed to harvest too many trees in one place, making the habitat for wild animal game less suited. Taking out trees in such a manner as legally allowed generally seems to damage the woodland less than when clearing the land as much less of the forest cover is removed in the same place. For the forest’s suitability for hunting, this would be a good thing. A forest which is not deprived of its tree cover would probably be in the best interest of the king and the animals he sought to protect. Additionally, if a forest area was destroyed by whichever cause, and a forester was guarding the forest at the time, the owners and their subjects were responsible for the rehabilitation.<sup>43</sup> This would probably make delegated owners of woodland in the king’s forest ensure that it was well guarded, as they were required by law.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, the prohibition of “wasting” the forest would be a central aspect of preserving the forest for the hunting needs of the king and those he delegated hunting rights to. Conservation of wilderness was important to all, but it seems the monarch more than the local peasants were aware of its long-term importance.

Free men were, by the *Forest Charter*, able to take what they wanted from the land they owned, not only from cultivated land, but from woodland as well.<sup>45</sup> This is contrasted by the restrictions in the *Assize of the Forest*, probably a reaction to discontent around forest laws. Additionally, aeries for birds of prey and places to produce honey were allowed.<sup>46</sup> The access to and use of forest resources, such as what is contained in woodland, were widened

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<sup>42</sup> fitz Nigel, *Dialogue of the Exchequer*, 528.

<sup>43</sup> *Assize of the Forest*, clause 5.

<sup>44</sup> *Assize of the Forest*, clause 7; *Charter of the Forest*, clause 7-8.

<sup>45</sup> *Charter of the Forest*, clause 12-13.

<sup>46</sup> *Charter of the Forest*, clause 13.

dramatically. Comparing with the *Assize of the Forest*, the forests went from having severely limited access, to being open to landowners who needed to take out resources. Giving landowners this access, the forests would in theory be open to more exploitation. However, if wasting or destroying forest land was still prohibited, there would be limitations to the extent to which landowners could exploit their forest resources. The royal forests would probably be thought of as less of a restricted zone after the *Forest Charter* than before it. Most people would not need to be as nervous as before going there and exploiting it.

## CONFIRMATIONS OF FOREST LAW

Both the *Magna Carta* and the *Charter of the Forest* were officially confirmed at many points during the thirteenth and fourteenth century by royal statute. Statutes were laws passed by the king, often confirmations of previous laws with relevant additions. The first confirmation of the *Great Charters* by statute seems to have been in the *Statute of Marlborough* of November 1267. They were confirmed in their complete form by Henry III (r. 1216-1272). Under king Edward III (r. 1327-1377) they were confirmed in 1341. They were again confirmed under Henry IV (r. 1399-1413) in 1407 and at least 20 times in between. At these points in time, the two charters' validity were confirmed.<sup>47</sup> This is evidence that the forest laws as they are analysed in this chapter were valid throughout our period, until at least 1407. Therefore, the findings of the analysis can be applied to the whole period with some variation.

The first confirmation of the Charters that we know of is in the *Statute of Marlborough* of 18<sup>th</sup> November 1267 during last years of the reign of Henry III:

The great charter shall be kept in every one of its articles, as well in those pertaining to the king as those pertaining to others, and when there is need this shall be entrusted to the justices in their eyres and the sheriffs in their counties, and writs against infringers shall be granted freely [for action] coram rege or in the [common] bench or before the justices in eyre when they reach those parts. [The charter, moreover, of the forest shall be kept in every one of its articles everywhere and infringers when convicted thereof shall be punished by the lord king himself.]<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> *The Statutes at Large*, ed. Danby Pickering.

<sup>48</sup> *Statute of Marlborough*, 18<sup>th</sup> November 1267, ed. and trans. Harry Rothwell.

It confirms both charters in their complete form, meaning that no changes were supposed to be made before the confirmation. It makes sure that it is understood that every article should be adhered to, both those aimed primarily at the king and those aimed at others. Propounding this might hint at a desire by the author(s) to please the king's subjects, making clear that the charters are to be respected equally by both king and subject. Infringers, breakers of forest law, could easily be reported upward in the forest law system, first through the sheriffs or foresters, ending up with judgement by the chief forester. However, as we have seen, there were limits to how infringers of forest law could be judged. The 1301 confirmation by statute was based on "inspeximus", inspections of the charters by officials before committing to confirming them.<sup>49</sup> Following these are at least 25 known statutes published between 1341 and 1407 confirming the charters in about the same manner.

There is a regular change in whether the confirmation of the charters is placed in the first chapter of each statute or the second chapter. The cause might be variation in its expressed importance at the time of publishing the statute. The first and the earliest statutes made for each king refer to the "statutes made in the time of his noble progenitors", referring to the respect that shall be given to the actions of the predecessors of the new king. The fact that the *Charter of the Forest* is confirmed alongside the *Great Charter (Magna Carta)*, the peace of the realm and the privilege of the church indicated its continued central importance in the legal system. It seems that the *Charter of the Forest* was confirmed every year to propound its lasting impact on English law and to ensure that it stayed respected and adhered to. From this it can be concluded that the forest laws were central to the English Middle Ages and that they would be known to most inhabitants.

## CONCLUSION

Forest law of the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth century reflects the relationships that the legal authorities of medieval England had with forests, both in terms of woodland and as a legally regulated area designated hunting. The laws analysed reflect a split concern with the monarch's concerns versus the people's demands. The king primarily wanted as much control and preservation of the forest reserves as he could manage. His primary interest seems to have

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<sup>49</sup> "Inspeximus" of *Charter of the Forest 1225* by *Letters Patent*, 28 March 1300, ed. and trans. Harry Rothwell.



been hunting as a leisure activity as well as a source of quality meat and skin in areas designated for the purposes. A concern for the forest as a source of timber is not explicitly reflected in the laws. Most people affected by forest law were interested in increasing their own access to forest resources, as is reflected by the changes made by the *Forest Charter*. They wanted to have rights to take animals to pasture in forests, harvest resources such as building materials and materials for other purposes, food, and herbs. In some cases, it is evident from the laws that these same people sometimes wanted to clear land for cultivation or building. Both parties wanted freedom of exploitation of valuable wilderness. Therefore, the wilderness can be said to have been thought of as a potential resource rich reserve.

The findings of the analysis of the *Assize of the Forest* and the *Charter of the Forest* can be applied with an amount of confidence to the period following 1225, when the last edition of the *Charter* was written. The statutes in the period until 1400 confirmed the continued validity of the forest laws. At best, this means the relations to wilderness reflected in the laws lasted throughout our period in approximately the same form.

The laws reflect the role of the forest as a hunting preserve, in post-Conquest Norman England exclusive to the king's power. This power was delegated. Partly due to forest laws, the forest played a different role for the people living near them than for the monarch. These interests opposed each other: The king needed the forests to be optimised for use as the habitat of animal game, while 'the people' generally had little to no hunting rights. They valued the forest for its other resources and potential ground for cultivation. The forest laws seem to indicate that the main reason for conserving the forests was to maintain the availability of resources, for both interested parties. This seems to have been the case both with the king, mostly reflected by the *Assize of the Forest*, and with the barons, mostly reflected by the *Charter of the Forest*.

From the analysis it is evident that wilderness, and often royal forests, were sought for their value as pasture for certain animals. This was in the interest of all those who owned pigs, cattle, and bees. The wilderness was valuable to their livelihood, making them want access to it. This was provided for them, but not in an easily accessible manner as their interest conflicted with that of the monarch. From this can be concluded that the peasants saw the wilderness as a contested territory where they had to be careful about where they travelled and where they grazed their animals. It was filled with legal borders that had to be respected. Of course, this is only one way they probably saw forests.

Many wanted access to the wilderness in England, but as much of the resource intensive wilderness was regulated by forest law, many seem to have felt the urge to challenge forest law. It seems, the English people involved in law-making, were aware of the dangers of over-exploitation of wooded areas. The study by Philippe Braunstein concludes this as well.<sup>50</sup> Forests were legal battlegrounds between the nobility and the lower socio-economic levels of society for the use of them. The latter wanted to use them for subsistence and, most likely, development of their own life-situation in a positive direction. The nobility wanted a secured ground for their leisure pastime of hunting and top-quality meat on the table. This led to conflicts such as the one in connection with the writing and confirmation of the *Charter of the Forest*. Although the rebellion was led by the barons, the peasants probably benefited. Therefore, it seems likely that the barons partly acted on behalf of the peasants, whom, however, they were dependent on. The king's concern was for the health of the forest. An unhealthy forest is not suited for sustaining animal life, especially large animal game. Also, thorough management of trees was necessary for high income from sale of timber extracted from forests. If too many hands had access to forests, the total benefit of having a forest would be lessened for everyone involved. Therefore, their use had to be regulated.

One implication to the analysis could be that the forest laws are not regulating all the wilderness in England, only that which was royal forest. They only treat royal forests. However, they still reflect what might also have been concerns for other owners of forest land except for the king. And they reflect concerns about the parts of the wilderness which contained resources interesting to people. The laws reflect what interested the monarch and its subjects, and which concerns they had for the wilderness used as hunting ground by the monarch. As with the sources in the next two chapters, the laws are texts written by someone who had different relationships with the wilderness. The text would therefore, through analysis, reflect some of these relationships. At least those possible to deduct from the text.

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<sup>50</sup> Braunstein, "Forêts d'Europe", 2.

# CHAPTER TWO:

## WILDERNESS IN BESTIARIES

### CONCERNING WILDERNESS AND THE ANIMALS WITHIN AS REPRESENTED IN BESTIARIES.

#### INTRODUCTION

Bestiaries are didactic taxonomies of the ancient and medieval world described a range of animals and objects at some point observed in God's creation, nature.<sup>1</sup> They were the ancient and medieval form of what is now known as zoological accounts, attempting to map out all living creatures, including humans, and some objects such as precious stones and trees. The creatures described are both real and mythological. They are taxonomies of the world's creatures written by Christian scholars.<sup>2</sup> In the context of this thesis, the bestiaries include entries on animals that roamed the wilderness of England in the Middle Ages: deer, wolves, foxes, eagles, and more. They reflect myths and legends, as well as the moral values attributed to the creatures at the time. Additionally, it reflects views on animals which were dominant at the time, as we shall see. Adjusting the problem statement to this chapter: What can the bestiaries written and read in England during the Middle Ages tell us about people's relationship with the wilderness and its contents? As with the laws of the previous chapter, a bestiary can form some unique fragments of the constructed image. Of course, it cannot provide a complete picture of how the animals and the wilderness they lived in were thought of by people living in England at the time. The bestiaries reflect a developing history of thought on the natural world. This development might be what has laid the ground for the relations people had with the wilderness and the animals within. It is therefore a useful source to answer the questions to the thesis.

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<sup>1</sup> Baxter, *Bestiaries and their Users*, 183-4.

<sup>2</sup> Crane, "A Taxonomy of Creatures", 6.

The bestiaries are largely copies of older texts, and not original works of the time. The bestiaries were likely written by clergy in monastic houses in England and in Continental Europe.<sup>3</sup> This makes them more connected to a literary tradition than a handbook for hunting written by a hunter would, such as the one written by Gaston Fébus in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century: *Livre de la chasse*.<sup>4</sup> The bestiaries of the Middle Ages were based upon ancient bestiaries. Some have concluded they were all developed versions of the original *Physiologus* of the ancient world.<sup>5</sup> Other relevant sources have been added to it with each copy of the original work. The illustrations that accompany the bestiaries are largely identical among the surviving samples. The copying of these texts, stemming from the *Physiologus*, hints at their didactic value. They were “among the most popular and important of Christian didactic works.”<sup>6</sup> Especially their Christian moralisations would be interesting for scholars at the time. Therefore, they need to be analysed as such and not as original works of their time.

The *Physiologus* referred to is a Latin Christian translation of the ancient Greek heathen *Physiologus*. The word itself means “the naturalist”, referring to the ancient author, whomever that was.<sup>7</sup> Its descriptions continually refer to Christian imagery, moral, and interpretations. They are used to illustrate Christian dogma and morals, in a didactic manner for the readers’ education. The creatures are studied with the aim of revealing, through them, hints at God’s hidden powers and wisdom. They were interpreted as part of creation and could therefore potentially be a source of knowledge about God himself, the creator.<sup>8</sup> It is written in a Christian worldview with biblical explanations and interpretations. In the Middle Ages, the world was seen as a mirror for humans to see themselves. Therefore, moral teachings could be interpreted from animals and other natural elements of the world. They could explain human behaviour and moral. The *Physiologus* was thus the original bestiary, as all the consecutive bestiaries written are based on the original *Physiologus*, often precisely copied.

As the bestiaries were largely copies, the authorship would have less influence over the text than with an original work. The surviving bestiaries we have available seem to have been produced by the clergy. The site of production of the bestiaries are relatively unknown. Ron Baxter lists the precise and approximate library locations of surviving English bestiaries. The

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<sup>3</sup> White, *Book of Beasts*, 237.

<sup>4</sup> Gaston, *Livre de chasse*.

<sup>5</sup> Baxter, *Bestiaries and their Users*, 29; Kay, “The English Bestiary”, 137.

<sup>6</sup> McCulloch, *Medieval Latin and French Bestiaries*, 15.

<sup>7</sup> McCulloch, *Medieval Latin and French Bestiaries*, 19.

<sup>8</sup> McCulloch, *Medieval Latin and French Bestiaries*, 15-18.

most interesting observation to the question of the authorship and audience of the bestiaries, is which religious order they belonged to. Eleven of the bestiaries belonged to Benedictines, three to Augustinian Canons, two to Cistercians, two to Franciscans, one to Dominicans, and one were marked as “for secular use”.<sup>9</sup> This does not mean this was the balance with which the distribution of bestiaries was in England in the Middle Ages. It might rather mean who had the best history of preservation. The writing of the bestiaries was left to the clergy, who would have the required knowledge and writing capacity. So, for this analysis, the writership is not important and will not be considered beyond it being the work of a Christian copyist with minimal influence over the text.

Only 15 to 20 percent of English bestiaries have survived to our time. That is 41 bestiaries.<sup>10</sup> They were copied in large numbers and would therefore be accessible to more than a few people. However, the people with direct access to the bestiaries would be the literate higher layers of society. The illiterate majority might on occasion hear someone orally communicate some of the contents of bestiaries through sermons, other official speeches, or in conversation. As some of the mythological creatures were portrayed in English heraldry, they might have been observed by many. Even if it didn’t carry any meaning to them, they would still be aware of unicorns and phoenixes as they would appear symbolically in many places. Knowledge of the regular English wild animals among the illiterate majority would probably be dominated by a cultural understanding that would be passed on through generations and by individual experience with their natural surroundings. Therefore, the only perspective we can for certain say that the bestiaries reflect is that of the clergy, the learned in society. The intended audience would therefore mostly be the literate clergy and others who were literate and who would be interested in beasts or something else concerning them.

The consumption of bestiaries was most likely the highest during the twelfth to mid-fourteenth centuries. Based on estimated production dates of surviving bestiaries, the rate of production peaked in the early thirteenth century and rapidly declined from the late fourteenth century. However, as Ron Baxter points out, the rapid rise in production in the first third of the thirteenth century was less rapid when considering that the oldest bestiaries were most likely scrapped due to poor condition.<sup>11</sup> Of course, this is an estimate, but the likelihood of it representing an approximate real rate of production seems high as the bestiaries seem to have

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<sup>9</sup> Baxter, *Bestiaries and their Users*, 150-151.

<sup>11</sup> Baxter, *Bestiaries and their Users*, 167.

<sup>10</sup> Baxter, *Bestiaries and their Users*, 165-7.

gradually gone out of use by the end of the Middle Ages in the middle of the fifteenth century. Assuming the this is approximately the real rate of production; its consumption popularity would follow the production rate quite closely in a production-demand relationship. That would lead to the conclusion that consumption of the bestiaries would be the highest during the high Middle Ages in England, in our period. This increases the generalisability of the findings of the analysis.

The description of the weasel in the *Eliduc* lay by Marie de France discussed in the next chapter, attributing it to healing powers hint at the value of the bestiary as a source to common thought about certain creatures.<sup>12</sup> The connection hints at the bestiaries' influence on medieval thought on animals. If this is the case, we can assume that the bestiaries are valuable sources to medieval thought in relation to nature, and therefore a good source to people's relationship with forests. The ancient knowledge constructions found in the bestiaries reflects some of the foundational knowledge to medieval thought in the same way as the biblical texts and the works of thought by the church fathers are.

The selection of which bestiary to analyse for this thesis led to the finding that most bestiaries of our period are very similar. Therefore, the results of the analysis would not differ very much between different bestiaries. Some of the most known bestiaries, the Aberdeen Bestiary MS 24, the Cambridge Bestiary *MS Ii.4.26*, the *Ashmole Bestiary*, and the *MS. Bodley 764*, were considered. These second-family bestiaries written around the middle of the period studied here, 1066 to 1400, are very similar in their contents. Therefore, it is possible to assume that the results of analysis of many of them would be very similar. The *Cambridge University Library* bestiary *MS Ii.4.26* is very similar to most other bestiaries written in England during this period. With an easily accessible, very good translation by T. H. White, it was a good choice. One other bestiary, *Oxford Bodleian Library bestiary MS. Bodley 764*, had to be included only for reference on possible differences, providing a broader analysis. I found this to be necessary to compensate for the *MS Ii.4.26*' shortcomings in certain entries. Their comparison is focused on their structure and prioritisations more than their written contents. There are many similarities between the two. Some entries are completely or largely identical, while many of the illustrations are identical except in artistic quality. The *MS. Bodley 764* are dated to somewhere between 1226 and 1250, placing it only some 20 to 50 years later than the *MS Ii.4.26* which is from around the beginning of the thirteenth century. For further

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<sup>12</sup> Marie de France, *The Lais*, 124.

comparison, the *MS II.4.26* is 156 pages of content and the *MS. Bodl. 764* is 273 pages of content. The latter includes much more text on several entries, so is therefore richer in its descriptions.

As the bestiaries was most likely written by more than one author, I do not refer to ‘the author’. Neither do I refer to the plural ‘the authors’ as the work is a copy of an earlier bestiary manuscript related to the *Physiologus* with some additions added later. It would therefore be wrong to attribute it to any one or any group of authors. The authorship is historical, and many different authors have contributed to the finished product. I do not refer to the authors as they were copyists more than they were authors. I refer only to the bestiary text.

In addition to analysing the text on the relevant forest animals, the illustrations accompanying them are analysed where their contents are contributing significantly to the textual analysis. They supply the textual analysis with what might only be interpretable by illustrations. This is not an art historic analysis; therefore, the illustrations are not provided in the text or an appendix. If need be, the illustrations can be found by looking up the sources they are referred to as present in. If referred to, they are on the same pages as the textual references refer to, so individual reference is not necessary.

Considering the extent of contents in the bestiary, the analysis must be concentrated on entries that is related to English forests. The entries most relevant to the thesis are the entries that treat the animals which lived in or were perceived to live in English forests. For instance, regarding the werewolf as mythological rather than real, it was perceived rather than known to live in the forest. The lion could have symbolic and metaphoric significance, but it is not relevant when treating English wilderness, unless they were perceived to have lived there, which is unlikely. The animals selected are those mentioned in both the laws in the previous chapter and those mentioned as living in the forest in the *Lays* of Marie de France and in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

## THE CAMBRIDGE *MS II.4.26* BESTIARY

The *Cambridge University Library MS II.4.26* bestiary contains articles on 48 animals categorised in the first chapter called “Beasts”. The next chapter on birds contain 38 articles on birds, including bees and a tree. The third chapter is on reptiles and fish. In the final section of

the book, trees and man are described in surprising detail but without any images relating to the text except an illustration of the scribe himself. The section of six pages on trees is worth analysing, but the part about humans is not analysed. A quite strict selection of what to analyse and not had to be made to limit the length of the chapter and to avoid repeating evidence excessively.

The *MS Ii.4.26* bestiary is among the second-family bestiaries category. They are mostly based on the *Physiologus*, *Etymologiae* by Archbishop Isidore of Seville, Aristotle (through intermediaries), and Ambrose's *Hexameron*. The second-family bestiaries were the "most favoured and widely circulated group of bestiaries, moving over the twelfth and thirteenth centuries outward from monastic milieus to sermons for laypeople, educational settings, and aristocratic courts."<sup>13</sup> This is important to keep in mind when analysing it. The Cambridge *MS Ii.4.26* bestiary cannot be interpreted as simply reflective of the attitudes of their own time, but of attitudes inherited from the ancient literary world. The bestiary reflects a didactic set of knowledge aimed at the medieval Christian reader and lay audience on different occasions. The knowledge was spread through the high and late English Middle Ages. Therefore, the bestiary can provide an image of a portion of the medieval mind in relation to forests. It was supposed to teach the new generation and would therefore contribute to the forming of their worldview. It was a literarily informed worldview the readers were taught, a view derived from ancient myths.

The bestiary was likely written by the clergy, speculatively William de Montibus (d. 1213), the master of the cathedral school of Lincoln from the late 1180s, and chancellor of the cathedral from 1194. "the *Distinctiones theologicae* ('Theological distinctions') and *Numerale* (Numeral) of William de Montibus influenced the texts of some manuscripts of a defined group of bestiaries, including Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, MS 254."<sup>14</sup> However, the bestiary is part of a literary tradition and was only edited by the scribe to the degree that some things were considered less important for its didactic value than other things. That is probably why we see some difference in the length of several entries between the *MS Ii.4.26* and the *MS. Bodl. 764*. Therefore, brief comparisons between the two can reveal some of these differences.

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<sup>13</sup> Crane, "Taxonomy of Creatures", 2.

<sup>14</sup> Freeman, "Bestiary (MS Ii.4.26)." *University of Cambridge Digital Library*. 03.06.2022.

<https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-II-00004-00026/11>



The section on trees is, according to White, mostly a copy of the same text in Isidore's *Etymologiae*. Therefore, he decided to paraphrase and summarise only the most interesting of its content. Much of the introduction consists of an etymological explanation of why plants are called what they are called, and where the words come from.<sup>15</sup> This part is very academically oriented, probably with little interest to non-clerical readers. The continuation involves pragmatic descriptions of plants. As this part is relatively functional in its descriptions, it is of minimal interest to the thesis question.

In the footnotes, the references to the bestiary translation are written in page number and not *recta verso* style. This is for precision and ease of access to the translation, pointing out that it is the translation that is analysed and not the original manuscript the translation is based on. Because the references are page number, the 'p.' has been omitted for clarity and conciseness with the other sources referred to by page number. Also, the manuscript code "*MS li.4.26*" is used to make clear which manuscript is referred to, although it is a translation.

## CATEGORISATION OF ANIMALS

The bestiary makes three categories of quadrupeds (animals walking on four legs): Domestic animals like sheep, horses, and cows; beasts like lions and panthers; and those who are neither but avoids being domesticated by humans. The last category are the wild animals who do not let themselves serve humans in any way, largely the ones hunted: "stags, fallow deer, wild asses and so forth."<sup>16</sup> It is interesting to note that the animals typical of the areas regulated by forest law are in their own separate category in the bestiary. They are wild animals suited for being hunted by humans and suitable for serving at a dinner table. They are the animals most relevant to this thesis as they make up most of the animated life of the forest. Categorising the wild animals into their own category indicates a forming of the medieval mind into thinking of some animals as belonging to the wilderness. The categories are derived from Isidore's *Etymologiae*, but their continued use reflects that the categories were considered useful. They pointed out that there is a difference between animals who are naturally wild and those who were created to be possible to tame, such as the dog and cattle. Wilderness and

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<sup>15</sup> *MS li.4.26*, 217.

<sup>16</sup> *MS li.4.26*, 71.

humans are portrayed as separate. Wilderness and the wild animals are untameable and can therefore not be controlled individually and directly.

According to the bestiary, the term ‘beast’ only applies to a certain kind of animals. The term “beast” is defined as including “lions, leopards, tigers, wolves, foxes, dogs, monkeys and others which rage about with tooth and claw – with the exception of snakes.”<sup>17</sup> They are different from other animals in that they live by their own will and therefore are wild and free by nature. They are driven by their own will alone.<sup>18</sup> It seems a certain amount of aggression (“rage”) is required for an animal to be called a beast, as that is a common trait among all the examples provided. It must be a potential danger to humans, but it must have legs as snakes have been left out. Such a strict definition of a beast indicates that there was a perceived fundamental difference between animals based on their relation to humans. They were not all just animals, some were beasts to be careful around, while others were shy as the deer. The predators of the forest had their own category, which indicates a consciousness of predators as the potentially dangerous animals to humans. All the examples provided are wild animals except for the dog. However, dogs were often used for act of aggression either towards humans or animals. Its difference from the others is that it is tameable. The categorisation does not seem to carry much meaning by itself other than as a helpful clarification for the rest of the analysis. So, it is left as such.

Birds seem to have been taken for granted as part of the natural world, with little attention paid to other birds than the more unique kinds. Birds are divided into eleven categories, but the bestiary admits there are many more. There are too many different kinds to count them all.<sup>19</sup> It is not necessary to list the categories here, but in sum birds are categorised by their most obvious nature, some of them in relation to humans if there are any. They differ in “kind and custom” and are plentiful in numbers. The author leaves the impression that they are everywhere and are of any kind, but none are categorised as being tied to woodland or forests. Such connections are made individually rather than categorising some birds as ‘those living in the forest’. Therefore, their analytical value in this thesis are the individual qualities of some species of birds.

The bestiary allows more space to animals that they have a good personal relationship with, horses, dogs, and bees. These three animals are portrayed as friends to man. This is

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<sup>17</sup> *MS li.4.26*, 1.

<sup>18</sup> *MS li.4.26*, 7.

<sup>19</sup> *MS li.4.26*, 103-4.

pointed out by White as an interesting note on the writers' relationships with some animals being stronger than with other animals. White also points out that "in the Middle Ages, [...], there was a tenderer attitude to animals and children than has sometimes developed since."<sup>20</sup> The impression from the rest of the bestiary is that as well. The bestiary shows an empathetic view on most of the animals, including those who are potentially dangerous to humans. In relation to animals of the forest, this shows a contrast. The forest animals are given less space than the animals closest to humans. The stag is given two pages while the dog is given four pages, as is the horse. The wolf is given three pages, much of them concerning its allegorical connection with the Devil. It becomes clear that the bestiary and partly the texts it is derived from were written with meaning to humans in mind. Animals which have more meaning to humans deserve more space than those who does not. The animals of the forest therefore seem less interesting to the human writers and audiences than the animals closest to them or those who carry more meaning such as the lion or the phoenix.

## ANIMALS MADE FOR BEING HUNTING

The entry on the "stag" directly points at its role as animal game. Its ability to heal from the wound of an arrow by eating a Dittany plant, followed by shaking "of any arrows they may have received", hints at a connection with hunting. The stag can avoid pursuing hounds by placing themselves with a "following wind, so that their scent may blow away". Its natural behaviour of freezing still when they fear they are hunted is described as beneficial for archers hunting them. Additionally, some parts of the stag's body can be used for their healing properties: The "rennet of a fawn killed in its mother's womb is capital against poisons, while "ointments made from their marrow will settle heats in sick men". The meat itself is allegedly full of healing properties according to something the authors "read". The meat, if consumed regularly, might lead to immortality and immunity to sickness, but to a weakness against wounds.<sup>21</sup> All these characteristics of the stag, or deer in general hint to the stag, and young fawns' suitability as animal game and as consumables. It is made clear with these descriptions that humans are expected to hunt the animal and that deer was created with hunting in mind.

The entry on the stag, the "cervus", in the *MS. Bodley 764* bestiary is slightly longer than the entry in *MS li.4.26*.<sup>22</sup> More importantly, it also includes an entry on the roe deer,

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<sup>20</sup> White, *Book of Beasts*, 64.

<sup>21</sup> *MS li.4.26*, 37-40.

<sup>22</sup> *MS. Bodley 764*, fol. 18r-19v.

spanning a page in the manuscript. In its attached image, the roe deer is being hunted.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, both the stag and the roe deer were seen as animal game. Their purpose was to be hunted by humans. This hunting was reserved for the aristocracy, not for the peasants. Therefore, it reflects the perspective of the aristocracy first and foremost. However, the peasants were most likely aware of the role of deer as animal game, and that they were reserved primarily by and for the king. Peasants might have taken the risk of poaching to earn extra money and get better food for a few meals. However, that would involve great risk for them if it wasn't necessary or easy to hide.

The fox is not described directly as an animal game. The only possible indication of it being hunted is the mention of its tendency to walk in a non-linear manner, more easily avoiding being tracked and shot at.<sup>24</sup> This might be pointing to the difficulty of hunting foxes as it is hard to track because of its confusing movement. But it might simply mean that it is a unique characteristic worth mentioning. Keeping in mind that the bestiary is more a copy than an original work, the reason for mentioning this is more likely ancient. The meaning placed on the fox is not necessarily indicative of its value to humans as a target for hunting practice. Fox hunting seems to have been practised in England since at least the fourteenth century, and possibly earlier. It was often not hunted but dug out and killed as vermin.<sup>25</sup> The avoidance of attributions of the fox to hunting might indicate that it was largely not seen as animal game for most of European history until it became a sport to hunt it during the fourteenth century.

Even though dogs are not living in the woods and forests of England, their entry contains relevant descriptions of the dog in relation to forest animals. The meaning of dogs is divided into different categories of breeds:

Some track down the wild creatures of the woods to catch them. Others guard the flock of sheep vigilantly against infestations of wolves. Others, the house-dog, look after the palisade of their masters, lest it should be robbed in the night by thieves [...]. They gladly dash out hunting with Master, [...]. In sum, it is a part of their nature that they cannot live without men.<sup>26</sup>

Dogs are presented as completely dependent on man, more specifically their master, their owner. Some dog breeds were suited for hunting and as guard dogs, while others were more

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<sup>23</sup> *MS. Bodley 764*, fol. 21v-22r.

<sup>24</sup> *MS li. 4.26*, 53-54.

<sup>25</sup> Middleton, "The Origins of English Fox Hunting", 13.

<sup>26</sup> *MS li. 4.26*, 62.

suites as protectors of otherwise vulnerable sheep against wolves. In contrast to the entry on wolves, an antidote to their aggressive behaviour against humans is the dog. However, it is not made clear whether the dogs could hunt wolves in addition to protecting against wolves. In relation to hunting in general, dogs are described as useful for tracking down prey to make it easier for the hunter to find animal game to kill. This connects the dog to humans directly while making the wild animals seem distant. The dog protects humans against nature and helps them utilise it. It is not figured as part of nature, but part of humanity.

A more detailed account of the dog's hunting abilities is provided further into the entry. The dog is portrayed as having very analytical abilities. It can deduce the truth from evidence found, either tracks or by understanding of other's behaviour. In relation to hunting, it can figure out which way an animal has gone when faced with a crossroad. It is specifically stated that it tracks down hare and stag, both animal game hunted at the time.<sup>27</sup> Its personality and mental abilities are described thoroughly, indicating a stronger knowledge of the dog than of wild animals. This strengthens the line between wild and tame animals in the medieval mind.

The wild boar is not related to hunting anywhere in the bestiary. It is briefly described as "wild and rude", a "boorish or country pig".<sup>28</sup> From the text itself, it is not obvious that the wild boar was hunted by humans. It is only from external knowledge about its perceived role as animal game that we can interpret its wild nature as being related to its role as animal game in English culture. In the *MS. Bodley 764* bestiary, the wild boar's role as animal game is pointed out in its illustration. It is depicted as being stabbed in the belly by a man lying under it, which might indicate that the wild boar can be aggressive when threatened. It is also stabbed by a spear held by another man at a longer distance away from the wild boar.<sup>29</sup> It was common to hunt wild boar with a spear rather than with bow and arrow due to its tougher skin. This illustration shows a hunting incident involving a boar. From this we can assume a relationship to the boar similar to that of the stag. The boar was to humans an animal to hunt, even though the bestiary is relatively silent about it. The illustration says more than the text on its relationship to humans.

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<sup>27</sup> *MS. Li. 4.26*, 63-4.

<sup>28</sup> *MS. Li. 4.26*, 76.

<sup>29</sup> *MS. Bodley 764*, fol. 38v.

## SYMPATHY FOR THE ANIMAL PERSONALITY

All the creature-descriptions analysed provide an etymological explanation of their personality. The description of the stag is initiated by an etymology, as is the case with most of the entries. The stag (*cervus* Lat.) is named thus from its “snuffing up the Cerastes – which are horned snakes” or from bearing horns which is ‘cerata’ in Ancient Greek.<sup>30</sup> The etymology is derived from earlier written works on stags, as it is not referring to any English traditional naming, but Greek and Latin. By referring to the name of the stag in Greek and Latin the Greek and Latin selection of characteristics are derived which were considered most important to them when deciding the name for the animal. The case is the same with the fox, the wolf, the wild boar, and the hawk. The importance of personality reflected in the text indicates a relationship with animals that are not distancing humans to them. Animals were not seen just as machinations of nature, but they are characterised by individual personalities belonging to each species.

The etymological explanations of the names in several entries places the meaning of the word in relation to a meaning related to human behaviour. The animal behaviour is likened to that of humans. The Latin word for fox, ‘vulpis’ is connected to, “volupis” a “person who winds wool”. The etymological explanation is that since the fox never runs straight, it can be likened to a person making a reel of wool, never running straight.<sup>31</sup> These connection between animal names and human behaviour might indicate that the animal was seen with a human point of reference. At the same time, they show an understanding of the animal point of view. This sympathy for animal behaviour seems to be characteristic to the bestiaries and therefore to the English Middle Ages. It is reflected in several of the entries already discussed.

Other animals are not likened to humans in any way. Their distinct personality is respected as their own. The magpie is described as able to imitate human speech, but not able to speak freely. It is one of the animals that are not moralised in any way. It is only described as it is, very briefly.<sup>32</sup> The same is the case with the “woodpecker”, the “picus”. It is also briefly described by its unique behaviour, but it is not moralised or made into a metaphor of any kind.<sup>33</sup> These brief descriptions purely of the nature of the specific animal might indicate that the animal did not carry much notable symbolic or moral value. It just is, and it has a distinct personality. This implies a difference between animals that have been given meaning to

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<sup>30</sup> *MS. li.4.26*, 53.

<sup>31</sup> *MS. li.4.26*, 53.

<sup>32</sup> *MS. li.4.26*, 138.

<sup>33</sup> *MS. li.4.26*, 138.

humans and those who have not. Some animals were known for their personality, and little else.

The mating of stags and the caring for their fawns are described in detail. It does not seem improbable that this part is written based on empirical knowledge rather than textual evidence. The mating and caring could easily be observed by at least some English around the time of writing. However, this knowledge could also be textual tradition as it has probably been observed as long as humans have been hunting. The point in time the female stags conceive is set as a rule at “the time of the star Arcturus” (during springtime).<sup>34</sup> Whether it is meant that the stag is somehow connected to the star or that the authors only say that to place it in time is uncertain, but the star is most probably used the same way as celebrations of saints are used to mark times of the year. This reflects an interest in and an understanding of the more personal lives of deer. The text is not ignorant of these more intimate details, leaving its didactic function as understanding of animals as well as learning from them.

The wolf is elaborately described as a danger to humans and their animal livestock and game. The illustration of the wolf depicts a wolf sneaking conspicuously in on livestock, three sheep and what looks like a goat.<sup>35</sup> Fear that their own livestock should be devoured by any wild beast must have been common among those who owned livestock or who were otherwise dependent on them. Then the wolf, if it really attacked livestock, must have been seen as a great threat. Further, the wolf is described as a man-eating beast who “massacre anybody who passes by with a fury of greediness” and “whatever they pounce on, dies.”<sup>36</sup> At first, this sounds like an overestimation of the wolf’s volatility, its tendency to relentlessly attack humans by instinct. But it is plausible that the wolf might have been experienced as more aggressive at the time for this description to be seen as an exaggeration. Moreover, wolves are described as “rapacious”, therefore attributed to prostitutes in that they “devastate the possessions of their lovers”.<sup>37</sup> Not only are they dangerous to humans, but also to each other, according to this description. Now, this description is likely not based on the experience of the writers, but it might reflect a confirmation of this interpretation of the wolf’s behaviour. This leaves the wolf generally described as a very dangerous beast to be avoided at all costs, and not as a sight to see or something to seek out for any other reason than to hunt it down. As part of the forest, it is seen as an obstruction to human endeavours and is not portrayed romantically in any way.

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<sup>34</sup> *MS li.4.26*, 39.

<sup>35</sup> *MS li.4.26*, 56.

<sup>36</sup> *MS li.4.26*, 56.

<sup>37</sup> *MS li.4.26*, 56.

In a supplementary note, a method for avoiding the wrath of the wolf is described in detail:

Now what on earth can a man do, [...]. If he is able to do anything, let him drop down his clothes to be trampled underfoot and take two stones in his hands, which he must beat together. Seeing this, the Wolf, losing the courage of his convictions, will run away; and the man, saved by his own ingenuity, will be as free as he was in the beginning.<sup>38</sup>

What exactly this ritual means is not elaborated on, so it is guidance without explanation to be followed without question. Both the undressing and clashing of stones might scare away a wolf, undermining its natural courage. So, the method might be more practical than it sounds. Therefore, the method seems very theoretical and not based on more recent practical experience with wolves. The outtake “losing the courage of his convictions” indicates a humanisation of the animal and its mentality. The wolf is described as a natural enemy to humans, only avoidable by convincing it to act against its nature. However, there is no indication that the wolf could or should be hunted, despite specialist medieval efforts to hunt wolves effectively away from royal forests to deny them the royal animal game.<sup>39</sup> It is simply to be avoided by scaring it. The bestiary laid a mental ground for the view that wolves are natural enemies of humans, if this was not taught already through stories told children or otherwise prior to formal education.

## EVIL OBSERVED IN ANIMALS

Several of the creatures and objects in the bestiary are subject to moralisation, and some of them are used as exemplifications of evil. The fox’s fraudulent nature is used as an allegory for the same nature of the Devil. The Devil accordingly plays dead to trick those who are not faithful, those “living according to the flesh”, until they are close enough for him to grab them and punish them.<sup>40</sup> The moral referred to seems to be that those who live by lust and greed will, sooner or later, be punished for their sins by the Devil, leading them to hell. This does not necessarily mean that the fox is evil, only that one trait of the fox is also found in the Devil. In that sense, the moralisation and the animal did not necessarily have a practical connection, but rather a symbolic and metaphorical connection.

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<sup>38</sup> *MS li.4.26*, 60.

<sup>40</sup> *MS li.4.26*, 54.

<sup>39</sup> Pluskowski, “Where are the Wolves?”, 290.



As previously noticed, the wolf was described as a beast to be feared. To add to that, the wolf is likened to the Devil:

The devil bears the similitude of a wolf: he who is always looking over the human race with his evil eye, and darkly prowling round the sheepfolds of the faithful so that he may afflict and ruin their souls.<sup>41</sup>

This theological interpretation of the wolf confirms its status as the enemy of humans, both directly and indirectly. It is seen as watching sheep from a distance, ready to strike at an opportunity, as the Devil does to humans. The weaker hind of the wolf is likened to the Devil's fall from grace, being made evil "by the hindward way". The glowing eyes of the wolf at night is allegorised with the alluring and attractive impression the devil makes on humans lost in the dark of their conscience. The wolf's habit of hunting further away from its den when it "whelps", has had wolf cubs, is allegorised with the Devil's habit of going after those who are furthest away from him and closer to God.<sup>42</sup> These three allegories confirm at least the Christian devilish view of the wolf. It is not in any way portrayed positively. According to the bestiary, it seems there is nothing good in the wolf. This lays certain ground for the wolf to have been feared for its qualities.

The owl is described as "symbolical of the Jews" because of their denial of Jesus Christ by allegedly saying "we have no King but Caesar". Jews are likened to the owl as valuing "darkness more than light". Therefore, Christ lights upon those who are sitting in darkness valuing light more than darkness, pulling them to him into the light as his servants.<sup>43</sup> The Jews are shamed for rejecting the blessing of Christ. God seeks everyone, but not everyone accepts him. The owl is morally described as a creature of darkness, not favourably described. Other birds who prefer darkness are said to be owls as well: the "Night Heron" and "Bubo the Eagle Owl".<sup>44</sup> The entry is slightly negative in tone as the moral allegory between the owl and the Jews is negative, something to avoid doing oneself, as a Christian. Therefore, from this entry, it can be concluded that the owl is seen as an animal who is not necessarily evil, but who avoid the light and the blessing of being a servant in the light of God. Darkness seems to be connected to evil, whether in the wilderness or in a town. Night-dwellers are therefore seen as evil beings,

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<sup>41</sup> *MS li.4.26*, 59.

<sup>42</sup> *MS li.4.26*, 59.

<sup>43</sup> *MS li.4.26*, 134.

<sup>44</sup> *MS li.4.26*, 133.

making the wilderness seem more evil at night than in daylight. During the night, evil is allowed to roam.

The partridge, a bird in the same family as the pheasant, which was hunted in the Middle Ages, is described as a “cunning, [and] disgusting bird.” Its behaviour in pointlessly stealing the eggs of other partridges and male copulation is allegorically likened to the Devil:

The Devil is an example of this sort of thing. He tries to steal the children of [God], and, if they are foolish or lacking in a sense of their own strength, Satan is able to collect some of them somehow, and he cherishes them with the allurements of the body. But when the call of Christ is heard, the wise ones, growing their spiritual plumage, fly away and put their trust in Jesus.<sup>45</sup>

This allegory reflects the fundamental hatred for homosexual sexual encounters and the possibility of wise humans to escape the earthy lures of the Devil. The animal itself is seen through a Christian lens, morally placing it on the side of the Devil. The partridge is not accepted as it is because it carries no Christian moral, while other animals can do harsh things to others while they are not placed on the evil side of the spectrum by the bestiary(s). It might be the case that the partridge is seen as inherently evil in that it does not do hurtful things with a good moral meaning in mind. It does it without meaning other than allowing its earthly lust to control it.

## GOOD OBSERVED IN ANIMALS

Other animals are used to didactically explain good morals to the bestiary’s Christian audience. Weasels are described as having the power of resurrection. They “are said to be so skilled in medicine that, if [...] their babies are killed, they can make them come alive again if they can get at them.”<sup>46</sup> This itself is not used as an allegory, but it is a unique power attributed to a non-mythological animal living in English forests, which is also stated in that entry. It is the weasel’s behaviour in conception and in giving birth that is made an allegory of. It is attributed to Christians who accept God’s word, but who, despite this allow themselves to be “shackled by the love of earthly things, put it away in the wrong place and dissimulate what

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<sup>45</sup> *MS li.4.26*, 136.

<sup>46</sup> *MS li.4.26*, 92-3.

you hear.”<sup>47</sup> In other words, the weasel’s behaviour in conception and giving birth is used as moralisation. It carries religious meaning beyond its physical form. When observed, the weasel may therefore have been a reminder of this moralisation, if it really was common knowledge. The wording of the above-cited sentence makes it seem like something that was added to the text in that edition, making it less likely that the moral connection was commonly known.

It is recommended in the entry on the eagle that men who are clothed in “old garments and have the eyes of your heart growing foggy. Seek for the spiritual fountain of the Lord and lift up your mind’s eyes to God – who is the fount of justice – and then your youth will be renewed like the eagle’s.”<sup>48</sup> This is likened to what the eagle supposedly does. When old and foggy-sighted, the eagle flies towards the sun to be healed to youth by the beams of light from the sun at close range.<sup>49</sup> The eagle, as the weasel, is given moral meaning by its behaviour. The difference is that it is at least partly mythological. Based on ancient myth, the eagle, which could be found in England at the time, was attributed to a Christian message. A respect for the eagle can be derived from this. If respecting the eagle, it is probable that other great animals in England was respected for their form and behaviour, showing a fascination with nature, not only pragmatism.

The coot, a waterbird, is described as catching the eagles that are left by their parent when tested against the rays of the sun. They adopt the ‘failed’ eagles as their own. This is used as a moralisation directed at humans, propounded in the text: “Very well, there you have the Coot supporting strangers, while we humans turn out own kin away with unfriendly cruelty!”<sup>50</sup> The moralisation is very coarsely written, without any elegance, blaming humans for their attitudes to strangers. It can also be interpreted as a partly humorous point as well. A specific personality is set for the coot, explaining their general behaviour. It is portrayed as better than most humans in this aspect, reflecting a positive attitude towards some wild creatures.

The hawk seems to be moralised implicitly. The parent hawks are described as being especially “spartan” to their offspring by forcing them to manage life on their own once it notices their strength. This is explained as an intentional act by the parent hawk. It does not want its children to become “sluggish” as adults, and therefore throws them into the trials of life on their own once they are considered ready.<sup>51</sup> This might be an observational explanation,

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<sup>47</sup> *MS li.4.26*, 93.

<sup>48</sup> *MS li.4.26*, 106-7.

<sup>49</sup> *MS li.4.26*, 105.

<sup>50</sup> *MS li.4.26*, 107-8.

<sup>51</sup> *MS li.4.26*, 139.

not new to this bestiary, but in style. But it seems like an implicit moralisation pointing towards human parenting and how it should be aware of the consequences of excess child-rearing. However, this cannot be confirmed, only speculated upon. If it is true or not, it opens the opportunity for anyone who gained this knowledge, to interpret it as good or bad, or at least something to learn from. Again, an animal often found in the wilderness is presented uniquely and with a possibility to learn from God's creation.

The motherly devotion of the nightingale is likened to the motherly devotion of a human mother living in poverty, making the best of it for her children despite harsh circumstances. The bird's song is likened to the mother's song for her children at night, temporarily forgetting their poverty. And the warming of the nightingale's eggs is likened to the mother's struggle to make bread for her children.<sup>52</sup> More directly moralising than the description of the hawk, this allegory is used as a praise to the poor mothers who remain devoted to her children. It is left open to interpretation by the audience of the text's message in the same way as with the hawk, but the allegorical message is made obvious here. A moral symbolism is attached to the nightingale, and it is allegorically attached to a certain group of people. Its symbolic value is pointed out despite its wild nature.

A more material sense of good is given the "horns" of the stag. A piece of advice is given concerning their horns. The one on the right side of its head is said to be useful for its healing properties, while either one could be burnt to keep snakes away.<sup>53</sup> The last of the two seem to refer to the stag's relation to the snake as its enemy, making the snake afraid of the scent or other sense of the stag's horns. Its pragmatically presented healing properties portray the source of the horns as good. This is the case with their characteristic of keeping snakes away if burned. The horns of the stag are filled with good, not evil power of some kind. Another piece of advice is given for the fawn, that the rennet of its stomach can be used against poisoning. The marrow of the stag can be used to "settle heats in sick men". Their meat, venison, can, according to the bestiary, bring immortality and immunity to fevers to men if it is eaten since childhood, with the downside that only a single wound will kill them.<sup>54</sup> This is part of medieval medicine. Knowledge about the different medical uses of animal parts are reflected in and taught by the bestiary. Speculatively, it seems there was a division between good and evil magical power in objects as well as in spirits.

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<sup>52</sup> *MS li. 4.26*, 140.

<sup>53</sup> *MS li. 4.26*, 39.

<sup>54</sup> *MS li. 4.26*, 39-40.

## CONCLUSION

As a didactic compilation of earlier works on categorising and explaining the meaning of animals, the bestiary reflects a tradition of knowledge that proposedly formed the medieval mind. The human relationships with the natural world, mythological and not, was, through the bestiaries taught to its audiences who seems to have mostly consisted of the clergy and the aristocracy. However, as its contents were also spread to the illiterate through sermons and through art, the formational effects of the bestiaries on medieval minds can be generalised to a degree. Therefore, the findings of this analysis can be suggested for most of the medieval population of England.

The medieval English relationship to wild animals seems to have been one of understanding and division. Humans and their dogs were living separately from the wild animals of the wilderness. Some were threats to humans, while others were seen as potential resources. Outside of these opposing categories are animals with moralistic meaning, but with little direct function in relation to humans. The categorisations of animals tell us about the perceived system that was placed by God. Generally, the system was logical in dividing between animals, consisting largely of mammals, birds, and reptiles and insects in their own category. Their relations to humans are explained by individual species, as is the case with their moralising meaning. Understanding of the animals' personalities and why they behave as they do is reflected in most entries. This indicates that people might have had a relatively sympathetic relationship with wild animals at the time.

Animals are, in the bestiary, understood as parts of God's creation through which humans can understand themselves. This might have been what some thought of when they saw animals in the wilderness, or when wild animals were used as symbols. Their relationships with wild animals might have been influenced by the bestiaries, settling assumptions about their personalities in people's minds. This is simplifying nature, but it also aids in people's understanding of wild animals. Seeing the wolf as evil, people would either avoid it or kill it. Seeing the stag as having a personality well suited for being hunted, they would be tempted to hunt it. Seeing the coot as good, it served as a reminder of how a good Christian should act. Should we believe that the understandings of the bestiaries were common, most people in the English Middle Ages would share this knowledge of the different animal characteristics, aiding their sympathy and familiarity with the wilderness.

The wild animals are not described as mere objects for humans to utilise, they are subjects by themselves with their own characteristic personality. They are evidently described from a human perspective, but not without effort to try to understand them from their own perspectives. This is suggestive of an understanding attitude towards the animals. The text can be interpreted as accepting the objects' utility to humans, but it is also trying to understand them. For contrast, it does not exclusively describe the stag as a target for hunting. It tries to understand the perspective of the stag, throughout its life. Utility is not the primary objective of the bestiary.

The bestiary's descriptions of animals are varying between good and evil, with complexities between the two. Animals are not always portrayed as simply good or evil, but as possessing good and evil characteristics. The wolf and the owl are described as mostly evil. Some, like the coot, is moralised as having qualities humans should strive towards. The readers are told to avoid the evil qualities in creatures, while striving for the good qualities. Also, the bodies of the animals might have been seen as possessing either good or evil properties, either healing or hurting those who consume their parts. Therefore, the view on animals that was taught by the bestiary was complex and not purely pragmatic or either good or evil. It shows an understanding of nature as a complex mixture of good and evil, which humans can learn from. Although some animals are only implicitly moralised through allegory, the moralisation can still be divided into good or evil.

The bestiary is very theoretical. It was not meant as a practical guide to the natural world as much as it is a compilation of myth, legend, and allegorical descriptions of animals carrying moral messages to the reader. It does not seem to have been supposed to be read exclusively literally. It is not among the more serious works of theology or Christian study at the time. It is less formally written, probably for a less educated audience. The beasts and plants described are therefore not described as a serious effort to understand the natural world as it is, but rather to draw wisdom from it. A professional hunter at the time would probably not find the bestiary very useful. The bestiary is not so much a description of different animals as it is a book explaining the theological meaning of different animals.

On the other side, the descriptions are not useless to answer the thesis question. An impression of the fundamental view the culture had on specific animals and plants can be interpreted from the manuscript. Some animals were described as almost exclusively evil by their nature, while others were described as proper for the hunt. In total, the animals of the

forest can be divided into three groups: the hunters, including the wolf and the lynx; the hunted, including the stag and the wild boar; and the neutral animals who were of minor interest to humans, except by fascination. There is a pattern: Animals and plants are interesting to humans to the extent they are useful to them, either for their carrying a moral message, as food, as enemy, as friend, or as objects of interest alone. This makes it obvious that an objective description of the animals was not the objective of the bestiary analysed. Animals were present in the world, and humans related to them in ways they found useful in any sense.

Whether this is generalisable to the whole population of England at the time is impossible to answer with any respectable level of precision. However, I suggest that it is generalisable to the general view of animals, and not just of the literary elite. As is the case in our own time, the mixture of ancient and more recent formulations found in the bestiary are likely not unique to the second-family bestiaries, but would be recognisable by a more general public, the peasants as well as the royal court.

The copying of the bestiary from older Physiologus and Isidore's *Etymologies* means that the literary work does not reflect any kind of new thinking. It rather reflects a tradition of thought from the ancient world which may have influenced the English Medieval imagination in relation to animals and the natural world in general. The bestiary tradition has formed mythological, behavioural, and theological views of animals and mythological creatures. Therefore, it is a valuable source to understand how animals were understood during the Middle Ages. The bestiary tradition would influence their view, but it would not be the only source to human relationships to wild animals. Personal experience and culture would play significant parts as well. The bestiaries were part of English culture, but far from the only part. It is however a useful supplement to the romantic and legal sources analysed in this thesis.

# CHAPTER THREE:

## WILDERNESS IN ROMANCE

CONCERNING MEDIEVAL ENGLISH REPRESENTATIONS OF  
WILDERNESS IN SELECT ROMANCES WRITTEN AT THE TIME.

### INTRODUCTION

The romances of the English Middle Ages reflect more than the practical and legal aspects of wilderness seen in the legal documents, and more than the animal focus of the bestiaries. They reflect the intimate relationships people had with the wilderness. The romance wilderness is magical, mysterious, fabulous, heroic, dark, and beautiful. The forest was at times a magical place, a sanctuary for wild beasts, ogres, centaurs, and trolls. It was part of and separate from the cultured world most humans would live in. They were the perfect scene for a good Arthurian romance. The forest was part of people's daily lives, and it seems to have influenced authors of romance as well as the lawmakers of the English Middle Ages.

In this chapter, two widely copied romances are analysed, the *Lays* by Marie de France, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* by an unknown author. Lays as a genre are typically considered romances. Both were popular and widespread romances at the time focused on in this thesis, between the Norman Conquest and the end of the fourteenth century in England.<sup>1</sup> In other aspects than their representation of forests and their contents, they are romantic and heroic adventures of men and women. It is their primary objective to transfer what are legends of Britain, both Arthurian legends and legends of other places and times. These two romances focus on the ideals of the time by portraying the characters' individual struggles and how they handled them in a positive light. Therefore, I consider the romances partly as guides to what a preferred behaviour and world view would be in England at the time, as well as being entertainment for the audiences. The romances also reflect what was taken for granted in the

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<sup>1</sup> Purdie et al., *Medieval Romance, Medieval Contexts*, 1.



mind of the author, and to other people at the time. For instance, it might have been taken for granted that the deep forest was a dangerous place for several reasons. If so, it is reasonable that the author would describe it as such. However, it depends on who the romances were written for, who wrote them, and how they were received and interpreted.

The questions asked of the two romances are twofold: In which ways did they portray wilderness, forests, woodland, and the creatures living in and off them; And in which ways does these portrayals indicate the author's and audience's relationships with the forest? The romances do not paint the full picture of these relationships, as neither do laws or bestiaries, but they might provide further indications for them. The romances may add to what the laws and bestiary indicated but not addressed directly or left out completely. What did people at the time have in mind if we had the opportunity to ask them about forests and what they were? This question is currently impossible to get answered by someone living at the time, but the romances might give indications to what the answer would be. It is what the romances indicate by themselves and who this may have applied to that is central to the analysis, not if this was the case or not. That requires a much broader research project.

Following the analysis of the two romances, it became possible to divide the findings into categories. The relationship with the wilderness as interpreted from the romances analysed can be put into three categories: the wilderness as a realm of trees, shrubs, and small plants; the animals within and the hunting of them; and the mythological, spiritual, and fantastical sense of the wilderness. It is useful to separate the relationships using these three categories as most people would not see the wilderness simply as a hunting ground or a place for worship of the devil or pagan deities, but a combination of several aspects. The three categories largely answer the questions asked of the sources, with some complexities in the details. The analytical section of this chapter is divided into these three categories.

I have interpreted the translation of both the *Lays* and *Sir Gawain* to the best of my ability. I am sure several of the lines referred to here can be interpreted otherwise, but I think I have caught the essence of them to a good enough extent for the purposes of this chapter. The question asked of the romances and the extent to which this thesis have space enough to investigate the question limits the level of understanding of the sources. The value of a much deeper analysis of the sources would mostly be beneficial for a better understanding of the text. It would not necessarily add much to what the sources indicate of people's relationship to the wilderness. Therefore, this analysis is sufficiently deep for the purpose of this thesis.

## THE LAYS OF MARIE DE FRANCE

The *Lays of Marie de France* are well known among the many fables of medieval England and France. They are Breton romantic narratives transferred from oral to written form by Marie, often involving fabulous elements which have been picked up by the author. Being Breton sources, they would stem from Brittany on the North-Western edge of Northern France or ancient Gaul, and most of early medieval Britain, especially Wales, Cornwall, and Northern Britain. Breton is usually considered British, as in opposition to Norman and Saxon. It is the ancient culture of Britain.<sup>2</sup> This was an area of religious and spiritual importance to Celtic culture and is still during the Middle Ages an area known party for its enchanted forests.<sup>3</sup> There are twelve lays in this collection: They are described as “true” stories by the author. However, they contain many doubtful elements such as werewolves and hawks transforming into princes. These are far from irrelevant to the analysis, whether they are true or not. It is what medieval people thought of the wilderness that is essential, not whether rational thought agrees.

The *Lais of Marie of France* consists of twelve poems: *Guigemar*, *Equitan*, *Le Fresne*, *Bisclavret*, *Lanval*, *Deus Amanz*, *Yonec*, *Laüstic*, *Milun*, *Chaitivel*, *Chevrefoil*, and *Eliduc*. In this chapter they are referred to individually in the text and not in the footnote for ease of access. The translation used is of the original manuscript *Harley 978* stored in the British Library. According to the author of the introduction, the lays were popular among royal courts and knights, the aristocracy, as well as among women in the same social level. They were dedicated to a “noble king”, most likely Henry II, but this is undecided among experts.<sup>4</sup> The *Lays of Marie de France* used in this analysis is the translation by Glyn S. Burgess and Keith Busby, and was originally written in Old Norman French, in an Anglo-Norman dialect and are based on orally transmitted Breton stories, communicated through lyrics.<sup>5</sup> In England around 1170, when the lays are thought to have been written, Old French, or simply French at the time, was the language of the Norman nobility and spread out to large portions of the upper social strata, including the growing merchant population. Being “of France,” Marie was primarily speaking and writing in French. The literary context of the lays is within a period of increasing amounts of literary works in vernacular languages and the spread of literary culture to

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<sup>2</sup> Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons*, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Porteous, *Forest Folklore*, 21-22.

<sup>4</sup> Burgess and Busby, *The Lais*, 12.

<sup>5</sup> Short, “Language and Literature”, 207.

England.<sup>6</sup> With a portion of the literate people in England understanding French, the *Lays* would have been available to at least some of them.

The language of writing of the lays is a determinant of who would have access to reading the text, either directly or recited orally. However, it cannot be denied that the stories themselves would be orally retold either in a near-complete form or fragmentally to many others in a range of various occasions. It is thinkable that the stories would be retold at least in fragmentary form to a wider audience after having been read or heard in its complete form by people of the higher social strata. The population of medieval England was surprisingly literate.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, we can assume that analysis of the lays reveals indications of relations to wilderness as formed and confirmed by the lays.

Who was this, Marie de France? It is not certain that Marie was the author, but it is generally agreed upon. There have been several good attempts at identifying Marie, but none have been conclusive yet.<sup>8</sup> The lays were, according to Marie herself, commissioned by a Count William whom we do not know the exact identity of. Count William of Mandeville, being the Earl of Essex from 1167 to 1175, is a candidate. William of Gloucester (d. 1183) is another great candidate.<sup>9</sup> These hints at her reputation, being admitted to the court of a count. The identity of the author is only important to the extent that she was familiar with the culture in England at the time and that she was a renowned writer. Both seem possible, making her works sufficient to ask the question posed in this chapter to romances.

For the lays, the page number in the Penguin translation used in this thesis are used. Line number was originally used, but it was not precise enough following the summary line reference style of the translation. Therefore, it was decided to use the page numbers as they make accessing the references easier if the Penguin translation is at hand. The page numbers are written without the ‘p.’, as with the secondary material.

## SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is the second analysed romance. The original text was written in Middle English, with a northern dialect. In contrast to the *Lais of Marie de*

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<sup>6</sup> Burgess and Busby, *The Lais*, 20.

<sup>7</sup> Hanna, “Literacy, schooling, universities”, 172.

<sup>8</sup> Burgess and Busby, *The Lais*, 17-19.

<sup>9</sup> Burgess and Busby, *The Lais*, 15-16.

*France*, it would have been more accessible to broader English-speaking literate population, including the increasingly literate merchant population at the time.<sup>10</sup> The oldest known version of the poem is more recent than the *Lays*. It was written around the year 1400 A.D. Although it is late in our period, it might still reflect much of the thoughts of at least the second half. The English writing of *Sir Gawain* would make it accessible to a wider section of the population than French and Latin works. It would be more connected to ancient English culture, appealing more to the general populace if made accessible to many. I would not consider it unthinkable for the story, or fragments of it to have been familiar to at least some peasants, farmers, and others in the lower social strata. The language used might also reflect the poetic tradition it is part of. Arthurian legend had its origins before the Norman Conquest.<sup>11</sup> *Sir Gawain* may therefore reflect a long tradition rather than a moment in time.

The story known as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* hint at a testing relationship between man and nature. According to the mid-21<sup>st</sup> century scholar in literature Dr. William Goldhurst, the story's main theme is "the idea that the primitive and sometimes brutal forces of nature make known their demands to all men, even to those who would take shelter behind the civilized comforts of court life."<sup>12</sup> The story revolves around the Arthurian knight Sir Gawain who, after beheading the Green Knight in a game goes looking for him all over Britain following his wish that he would do so. This takes Sir Gawain on a long journey through the wilderness, to beasts, monsters, forgotten places and beautiful ladies. All the time Sir Gawain spends in wilderness is relevant to understand what wilderness might have looked like in the medieval mind.

The romance is written in an 'alliterative' style typical of Middle English poems, a late attempt at its stylistic revival.<sup>13</sup> In this analysis, the locations of the parts referred to in the poem are referred by their stanza number as that is the most accessible. It can be used for the original manuscript and for translated versions. Lines are not used as it was too hard to work with localising them in a text which do not refer to lines.

## FORESTS AND WILDERNESS

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<sup>10</sup> Briggs, "Literacy, reading, and writing", 401.

<sup>11</sup> Ashe, Geoffrey, "The Origins of the Arthurian Legend", 21.

<sup>12</sup> Goldhurst, "The Major Theme of Gawain and the Green Knight", 61.

<sup>13</sup> Tolkien, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 14.

Forests are mentioned directly in several places in both the *Lais of Marie de France* and in *Sir Gawain*. Woods, like forests in most ways, are mentioned several places as well. It seems both terms are used interchangeably in these romances. The difference between the terms seems to be less significant in the romances than in the laws analysed in the previous chapter. There is little emphasis on the ‘royal forest’ of post-Conquest England. In *Le Fresne*, “Forest” and “Wood” are mentioned when describing the maid’s walk through it to get to a town to deliver one of the twin babies born by her lady: “That night, when all was dark, she left the town and took to a wide path which led her into the forest, and making her way through the wood by keeping to the main path[...]”.<sup>14</sup> They seem to be portrayed as the same thing, or at least nearly the same thing with some exceptions. In comparison with the laws in the previous chapter, the terms almost seem to be confused with each other as they both seem to refer to wooded land. However, it might be that both terms are mentioned to point out that the land was forest land by law, but most or parts of it was woodland.

In *Bisclaveret*, the story of the lord who turned werewolf at certain times of the week, ‘forest’ and ‘woods’ are used as interchangeably as in *Le Fresne*. The introduction lines to the lay describes that a werewolf is a man turned half wolf living in the “woods”: It “dwells in vast forests”.<sup>15</sup> Trusting the quality of the translation by Burgess and Busby, ‘woods’ and ‘forests’ seem to be used interchangeably. They seem to be largely sharing the same meaning. In this extract, it might seem ‘woods’ are more general than ‘forests’ as werewolves are described as living in the woods and are further described as dwelling in “vast forests”. Later, in the same lay, the werewolf Bisclaveret is described as hiding in “the deep woods”.<sup>16</sup> This might be interpreted as a confirmation that the two terms are used interchangeably as the dwelling of the werewolf is described as both “the deep woods” and “the vast forests”. They are very similar descriptions of what seems to be the same.

In *Yonec*, forests are portrayed as a natural part of a large town. In the description of the silver clad city the lady approached when following the blood trail of the knight whom she loved after he had been stung by the traps set by her husband lord, forests are taken for granted as a necessary piece to a perfect land surrounding a perfect city. Forests are taken for granted to the same degree as “enclosures” and “marshes”: “Over towards the town were the marshes, the forests and the enclosures, and in the other direction, towards the keep, a stream flowed all

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<sup>14</sup> Marie de France, *The Lais*, 62-63.

<sup>15</sup> Marie de France, *The Lais*, 68.

<sup>16</sup> Marie de France, *The Lais*, 70.

around”.<sup>17</sup> The obvious nature of the surrounding forests hints at a view that every large town has its own forest(s). Forests would more likely mean the same as royal forest but belonging to a town and its lord. That would be more similar to the ‘seigneurial’ forests in France belonging to a lord, hence ‘seigneurial’, rather than royal forests. The legal meaning of the word ‘forest’ seems the most probable meaning in this lay. The confusion between this example and *Le Fresne* and *Bisclaveret* shows the very similar meaning of ‘woods’ and ‘forest’. It does not become obvious from the lays that the confusion was present at the time, only that the words were given similar meaning.

Near the beginning of Sir Gawain’s travel to the Green Chapel where he seeks the Green Knight, he travels through “forest” and over “hills.” The most recognisable place he travels through is “Northern Wales.” From there he travels to the “wilderness of Wirral” where he finds the castle, he spends days in. The wilderness is the forest of the king of that castle. The forest is described as “deep and fearsomely wild” with “huge oaks by the hundred together; the hazel and the hawthorn were huddled and tangled with rough ragged moss around them trailing.”<sup>18</sup> The description is dark and negative. The focus is placed on the wild character of the forest. ‘Forest’ and ‘wilderness’ is used interchangeably. The wilderness Sir Gawain travels through on his way to the chapel of the Green Knight is vividly described:

By a mount in the morning merrily he was riding into a forest that was deep and fearsomely wild, with high hills at each hand, and hoar woods beneath of huge aged oaks by the hundred together; the hazel and the hawthorn were huddled and tangled with rough ragged moss around them trailing, with many birds bleakly on the bare twigs sitting that piteously piped there for pain of the cold. The good man on Gringolet goes now beneath them through many marshes and mires, [...] <sup>19</sup>

The wilderness is a dangerous and mystical place in this poem. The cold of the wilderness gives a sense of unpleasantness and risk of life. The typical trees of the English landscape are emphasised: the hazel, the oak, and the hawthorn. This indicates both that the intended audience was English and that they might have been the most common or most spectacular growth in wilderness at the time. As an Arthurian legend written for a late medieval audience, the descriptions are almost certainly made more dramatic than a forest would regularly have been described. It was the enchanted forest of Wirral Sir Gawain ventured into,

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<sup>17</sup> Marie de France, *The Lais*,

<sup>18</sup> *Sir Gawain*, stanza 31-32.

<sup>19</sup> *Sir Gawain*, stanza 32.

not any regular forest of England. However, the extract paints a picture of the forest that might have been integrated into the mind of the reader and others who heard the contents of the poem in brief or at length.

The difference might be that forests can be vast, but the woods can be deep. Forests can, according to English law alternate between wooded and otherwise wild land reserved for the free growth of trees and shrubs feeding and covering animal game. If there is a difference, a forest cannot by itself be deep unless it is wooded. Open fields cannot be deep, while woodland, an area covered with trees, can be deep as in being in shade by the trees, getting darker the further in you get. The deep woods might be read as the remote, dark, and dangerous part of the wilderness. It is nearly, if not impossible to say for certain what the difference was in the minds of all medieval people in England at the time. This discussion therefore leads only to the conclusion that all the above interpretations were present in at least some people at any moment.

In *Yonec*, the lord is not directly described as going out to hunt, but he is described as going out into the forest, leaving his home: “It was the beginning of the month of April, when the birds sing their songs, that the lord arose in the early morning and prepared to set out for the woods.”<sup>20</sup> We don’t get to know for certain what he was doing in the “woods”. He might have gone hunting, patrolling his lands, or been travelling through the woods to somewhere else. It can be assumed that the meaning of such an obscure line would be better understood by the audience of the time as they would have a better sense of what a lord would be most likely to do when going out into the “woods”. The interpretation is not important for the story that is told. It is only important that he is gone, and that the female protagonist is more able to do as she wishes while he is gone, hinting at the possible danger of his return. The lord awakening with the primary motive of going out might indicate how highly the woods were valued as a place of “recreation” for owners of lands, lords. That is, if the motive was to hunt or to go on a trip.

## A PLACE FOR HIDING

Following the Conquest of England by the Normans, starting in 1066, Hereward of Wake used the Isle of Ely as a base of operations in his opposition to William the Conqueror.

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<sup>20</sup> Marie de France, *The Lais*, 86-87.

The isle was at the time surrounded by fens, wetland, impassable for most military units at the time. This made the isle an easily defensible hiding-place for rebels such as Hereward. Wilderness is used as cover against prying eyes. The same is done in more than one of the *Lais* and in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Upon being coaxed by his lady, Bisclaveret reveals that he hides his clothes near an old chapel on the way to the forest, on a hollow rock “beneath a bush”.<sup>21</sup> Again, the natural environment is used as effective cover from weather and curious eyes. However, the significance of this detail should not be overestimated. A human seeking to hide something would simply use whatever place would best fit his purposes, natural or not. A person trying to hide something in an urban environment would be more likely to hide it behind a cut stone or a wooden board rather than beneath a bush. However, this simple act of utilising a natural object to hide something also tells us that the natural environment was not excluded when trying to solve their own problems, reflecting an openness to nature. Wilderness’ utility as a place to hide things is reflected in this lay.

In *Sir Gawain*, the “Green Chapel” where the Green Knight apparently lives during the poem, can be interpreted as a kind of hiding place for the Green Knight.<sup>22</sup> Also, his castle was located in the middle of the Wirral woods.<sup>23</sup> It is not a castle Gawain expects to find, it is hidden to him until he stands right in front of it. Both places are hidden in wooded areas from the eyes and knowledge of Sir Gawain. The woods function as cover for whole buildings, shrouded in mystery by their hidden presence.

In *Eliduc* there are two instances where forests or woods are used as cover. Eliduc and the company he lead in the foreign land he went to serve another ruler, planned an ambush by the road in the woods where the enemy were said to usually go unarmed with their spoils.<sup>24</sup> Further, in the same lay, Eliduc’s love interest from another realm are laid to rest in a small chapel described as being hidden in a “forest”: “All around it was a forest, thirty leagues in circumference, where a holy hermit, who had been there for forty years, lived and had a chapel.”<sup>25</sup> A perfect hiding place in the middle of a “forest”, he is able to go there to visit his swooned beloved, whom he thinks is dead, without before long drawing attention from his wife. Twice, the woods or forest are used as cover for hiding from other people, and effectively

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<sup>21</sup> Marie de France, *The Lais*, 69.

<sup>22</sup> *Sir Gawain*, stanza 86-87.

<sup>23</sup> *Sir Gawain*, stanza 33.

<sup>24</sup> Marie de France, *The Lais*, 113.

<sup>25</sup> Marie de France, *The Lais*, 122.



at that. It is another reflection of the role wooded areas probably played for several people in the English Middle Ages.

In the lay called *Chevrefoil*, the male protagonist, Tristram, hides in the “forest” after having been banished by the king, Mark. He only leaves the forest to find shelter for the night. When he hears that the queen, his beloved, were to pass by the “wood” on the road, he made a squared staff out of a hazelnut tree branch, carving his name into it for the queen to catch sight of when passing by: “To avoid being seen he took to the forest all alone, only emerging in the evening when it was time to take shelter.”<sup>26</sup> The forest and its covert qualities are used to a substantial extent in this lay. The forest along the road is valued as an excellent place for hiding while also providing materials for different uses, even symbolic and communicative as the stick became when he modified it. Again, the forest is effectively used for hiding. This reflects a view that woods were effective as a place to avoid being seen and found. The story about Robin Hood tells the same tale, escaping to wrath of authorities.

## WILD ANIMALS AND HUNTING

Hunting of wild animals seems to have been one of the most popular leisure activities in the Middle Ages of England. The rights to hunt were, as explored in the first chapter, severely limited following the Norman Conquest. The *Lais of Marie de France* mentions hunting on many occasions. The hero in *Guidemar* goes hunting as part of his leisure activities.<sup>27</sup> The king in *Equitan* has hunting as one of his dearest interests.<sup>28</sup> As already mentioned, in *Bisclaveret*, the king goes hunting in the forest where the werewolf dwells, as part of his leisure time. However, hunting is not dominating all the lays of Marie de France. It is not mentioned at all in *Le Fresne*, *Lanval*, *Les Deus Amanz*, *Milun*, *Chaitivel*, or *Chevrefoil*. In *Laüstic* it is not mentioned in the sense of somebody going out into a forest, but the cunning use of bird traps is demonstrated when an effort is made to catch a bird central to the story.<sup>29</sup> This limiting of mentioning hunting might be found in the *Lays*’ female authorship, as hunting was a sport largely reserved for men. The lays focus much on the women, reflecting the likely female authorship. But the cause for limiting mention of hunting cannot be said for certain. However, in the lays that involve hunting, the activity is described in some detail.

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<sup>26</sup> Marie de France, *The Lais*, 109.

<sup>27</sup> Marie de France, *The Lais*, 44.

<sup>28</sup> Marie de France, *The Lais*, 56.

<sup>29</sup> Marie de France, *The Lais*, 95.

Animal game can be portrayed as carriers of divine or at least spiritual meaning for the recipient. In the lay *Guigemar*, a white stag, shot by the protagonist Guigemar, is the carrier of the message that initiates the rest of the story. A fable beast, “a white hind”, teaches Guigemar a lesson when she is shot in the forehead by his arrow, being wounded. Guigemar however, gets the arrow through his leg when it rebounds off the hind. Both laying on the ground, the hind tells him, in short, that he will suffer his wounds until he finds a woman who will love him with all her heart.<sup>30</sup> This sets the condition for his change of character in the story. It is interesting, in a symbolic way, that such a great and beloved knight is being told by a deer he hunted in the forest, that he must change his ways. In one sense, it might seem ironic. A deer is the natural prey of privileged humans such as Guigemar. It is ironic then that the deer is cursing him on his deathbed. The white stag leads Guigemar on to a magical land where he finds a princess by being the catalyst of that trajectory. The white stag was at the time often interpreted symbolically as something good, a princess or even Christ, leading the hero in the right direction. It is often written into stories as a catalyst to good events for the hero.<sup>31</sup> This seems to be the case in *Guigemar* as it sets the protagonist off his regular path onto his voyage to the princess in a fantastical kingdom far away. The white stag therefore plays a role in making the forest and the hunt more mystical and mythological to the medieval mind.

In *Eliduc*, the royally favoured Eliduc, is allowed by his lord “King of Brittany” to hunt in his forest: “He could hunt in the forest and no forester was bold enough to oppose him or even grumble at him in any way.”<sup>32</sup> It was his favoured position, which he had effortfully obtained, that gained him hunting privileges in the king’s forest. His fame was extensive enough that foresters would not even question his hunting activities. They were taken for granted. As we saw in the first chapter, a king of England could delegate hunting rights at his whim. The same seems to have been the case in mythological or part historical Brittany, which is unsurprising considering the close location of Brittany to Normandy, where we know William the Conqueror, exported the concept of hunting ground exclusive to the primary ruler of the land, the king. This part of the lay expresses this tradition of privileged hunting having to be earned unless born as the owner of one’s own forest. To the medieval mind, hunting was a privileged activity among the richer population, primarily the king.

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<sup>30</sup> Marie de France, *The Lais*, 44.

<sup>32</sup> Marie de France, *The Lais*, 111.

<sup>31</sup> Cartmill, *Hunting and Nature Through History*, 73-74.

In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, hunting is described as an entertaining activity for the pleasure of both the hunters and later the consumers of venison. In the third chapter, during Sir Gawain's visit to a castle in the middle of a forest in Wales, the lord of the castle and his following of hunters with dogs spend two days hunting in the surrounding forest. They hunt both deer and wild boar. The deer was selectively hunted. They let the "harts" and "bucks," the male deer, escape, while the hinds, the females, were detained and shot by the huntsmen. The reason given is that the lord of the castle had decreed that the "male of the deer" should not be killed.<sup>33</sup> The reason for the decree is not written and can only be guessed. Likened to the forest laws, it might be meant to preserve the deer population of the forest as typically with deer, there are more females than there are males. If the reason is not irrational, this would be the cause of the decree. A conscious concern for the preservation of animal game is both demonstrated and reflected, either for self-interest or for moral reasons. Respect and care for the animals are indicated in the text and might therefore be reflective of the time of writing.

A great wild boar was hunted down in the third chapter of *Sir Gawain*. It is described as a lonely and fearsome boar:

Twas a boar without rival that burst out upon them;  
long the herd he had left, that lone beast aged,  
for savage was he, of all swine the hugest,  
grim indeed when he grunted.<sup>34</sup>

The great boar is portrayed as a problem that had to be dealt with. At the same time, it is imagined as a great prize to be hunted down by someone worthy. It is respected and feared at the same time. Indeed, this was an unusually fearsome boar, killing dogs and being a lethal threat to humans. Its description as a savage beast that must be felled also indicates a general fear of wild boars, as was common. The boar in the Middle Ages was "celebrated [...] as a premier big-game animal."<sup>35</sup> Further on in the poem, the great boar is felled by the lord of the castle in the nearby forest following attempts by the other hunters and their dogs. It is killed with a sword, not with a bow as the arrows bounced off its thick skin.<sup>36</sup> Regular boars are

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<sup>33</sup> *Sir Gawain*, stanza 47.

<sup>34</sup> *Sir Gawain*, stanza 57.

<sup>35</sup> Kreiner, "Ubiquitous Medieval Pigs", *Lapham's Quarterly*

<https://www.laphamsquarterly.org/roundtable/ubiquitous-medieval-pigs>

<sup>36</sup> *Sir Gawain*, stanza 62-64.

known to have been hunted with spears rather than arrows due to their thick skin. The lord was praised when returning home as the “fair ladies were fetched and the folk all assembled, and he showed them the shorn slabs, and shaped his report of the width and wondrous length, and the wickedness also in war, of the wild swine.”<sup>37</sup> The homecoming following the hunt of the great boar indicates the glory that was attached to hunting. It was an honourable activity that was expected of the lord and his selected huntsmen. The view on boars reflected is that they are usually both feared and respected. They were also seen as a great accomplishment to successfully hunt down and kill.

Meat seems to have been the food that was emphasised as the best among foods. In *Sir Gawain*, meat is the only mentioned kind of food on the feast menu in king Arthur’s court.<sup>38</sup> Later in the story, following a hunt in the forest of Wirral, the slaughter of the captured deer is emphasised in detail. The hunting and slaughtering of deer is vividly described as a fun activity which the lord of the castle and his hunters were very excited about. It is described as a game where it is the goal to kill the most deer and do it effectively. They expressly desire to bring back to the castle a great buffet of venison for the inhabitants to enjoy.<sup>39</sup> The meat of wild animals seem to have been highly valued. The aristocracy and their subjects, from the reflected attitudes in the poem, was animal game as meat fit for valuable people. It was the delicacy of the time. The peasants would probably be jealous, looking to a better life.

However, following the werewolf’s pleading by kissing the king’s foot and leg, the king was amazed at its “intelligence of a human”.<sup>40</sup> That realisation had the king end that day’s hunting excursion, taking Bisclaveret the werewolf into his protection. That seems to hint at the attitudinal relationship with humanly intelligent creatures versus other beasts of lesser intelligence. In this case, the life of a wild beast is spared once it showed submission and near-human intelligence. It might be derived from this that some animals were valued partly based on their level of perceived intelligence. A respect for intelligent life shines through the text. Other examples where animals were valued for their perceived intelligence might be the nightingale in *Laüstic* and the swan in *Milun*. It is not certain if this can be generalised, but it seems probable that this was a phenomenon among at least a few people living in our period.

## BIRDS

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<sup>37</sup> *Sir Gawain*, stanza 65.

<sup>38</sup> *Sir Gawain*, stanza 6.

<sup>39</sup> *Sir Gawain*, stanza 53-54.

<sup>40</sup> Marie de France, *The Lais*, 70.

Naturally, birds were present in the lives of medieval people in England. However, their relationship to them seems to have depended on who you would ask and which bird you were referring to. Some birds were cultural symbols while others were seen as vermin.<sup>41</sup> In the romances they were described in several different manners. Therefore, they deserve their own sub-section.

In *Yonec*, birds are referred to generally in the opening lines describing a beautiful morning: “It was the beginning of the month of April, when the birds sing their songs, that the lord arose in the early morning and prepared to set out for the woods.”<sup>42</sup> From a description of birds’ production of sounds as songs, a negative attitude is hard to derive, indicating a positive attitude towards the sound of most birds by the author and the tellers of the oral tale before she wrote it down. It indicates an appreciation of the sounds. The birds referred to might be birds living in the forest or birds that have adapted to a more urban lifestyle depending on the location and size of the town the lord lived in during the story. But the point is still that birds are described in a positive light, and not as annoying makers of noise keeping people awake or disturbed. The romance nature of the story does not necessarily influence this as the romances often describe things with great contrast: either as beautiful or good, or as ugly or evil.

The nightingale is specifically referred to in the lay *Laüstic*. When asked why she stays by the window every night, the woman in the story excuses herself to her husband by saying that “anyone who does not hear the song of the nightingale knows none of the joys of this world. This is why I come and stand here”.<sup>43</sup> The “song” of the nightingale is used as an obvious excuse for why she is standing by the window at night, when she is also talking to her beloved. This could indicate a widespread agreement that the sounds the nightingale produces are worth listening to, at least among the more openminded of people, again reflecting a positive attitude. The nightingale is generally an animal of the forest, a wild bird which is broadly appreciated for its production of what is often considered beautiful sounds. It is portrayed as a good aspect of nature, at least from the woman’s point of view. The husband reacts to the woman’s excuse by organising the capture of a nightingale nearby, bringing it to the woman, who is grief-stricken by its capture. He kills it in disappointment and throws it at the woman, making her curse all those involved in the capture and killing of the bird.<sup>44</sup> The husband seems to have misunderstood her relation to the bird, leaving him disappointed when

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<sup>41</sup> Fissel, “Imagining Vermin”, 1-2.

<sup>42</sup> Marie de France, *The Lais*, 86.

<sup>43</sup> Marie de France, *The Lais*, 95.

<sup>44</sup> Marie de France, *The Lais*, 95.

he hears her say she did not want it removed despite it being the alleged cause of her lack of sleep at night. In this sense, the relationship the two, the woman and the husband, had to the nightingale is conflicting in this story. That might refer to an acceptance of both views of the bird, but with an obvious positive lean towards the woman's view. The positive woman's view might be influenced by the female authorship of the lay. However, this should not alter the conclusion significantly. In essence, the nightingale is put in a mixed light, both as an annoyance and as a pleasure.

A swan is central to the lay *Milun*. In the story, a white swan is used as a messenger between the couple bound to a common shameful history where she bore him a son while being unmarried. They made the swan travel between the two by first feeding it well before starving it for one day, making it travel to its other home.<sup>45</sup> Swans were birds common to the aristocracy during the Middle Ages in England. They can be found in several coats of arms, and they were a symbol of status in society. Keeping swans, although semi-domestic, was a luxurious enterprise.<sup>46</sup> The presence and role of the swan in *Milun* might therefore be because of its noble status and its connection to the aristocracy that the lay focuses on. The swan's realistic role as a messenger is doubtful, so its presence might be more symbolic than pragmatic, as is often the case in romances. It is also portrayed positively, but from a human point of view. Its personality is not emphasised. Only its instinct of finding home and seeking food is pointed out. Any intimate human-animal connection is left out. It is only used as a tool.

Hawks were in most cases wild animals and in some cases tame animals used for hunting. In *Yonec*, the male protagonist transforms into a hawk, making it possible for him to visit the lady locked in a tower by her husband as a security measure. A large hawk is seen by the lady flying into a window in the tower in which she is locked. The hawk quickly turns into a "handsome" knight whom she is first afraid of before falling in love with him when he shows his courtly manners and intents. He successfully attempts to calm her partly by informing her that the hawk is a noble bird that is not to be feared.<sup>47</sup> Here the hawk is portrayed in a very positive light. The hawk was often used as a tool for hunting during the Middle Ages, but in this lay it is not described as such. Its personality is not emphasised. Only its human form is described in detail. It is a mythological being: part bird, part man. The general relationship,

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<sup>45</sup> Marie de France, *The Lais*, 97-104.

<sup>46</sup> Sykes, "Wildfowl Exploitation in England ad 410-1550", 91-92.

<sup>47</sup> Marie de France, *The Lais*, 87.

especially by the nobility, to hawks is not deductible from the lay. It could as well have been an eagle.

## MYTHOLOGICAL ENTITIES

Some aspects of the wilderness are neither animal nor plant, they might be mythological entities in different forms. In *Bisclaveret*, the main character is a werewolf, hunting in the deep forest when he takes the form of a werewolf, and ruling his own land as lord when in human form. The author propounds the reality of the story; however, it is scientifically doubtful it is real in any literal sense: “The adventure you have heard actually took place, do not doubt it.”<sup>48</sup> In the “*Wonders of Ireland*”, a part of the Norwegian *Konungs Skuggsjá*, a creature caught in a forest on an island outside Ireland, is described very similar to a werewolf without terming it ‘werewolf’.<sup>49</sup> The *Konungs Skuggsjá* is a didactic text from the thirteenth century meant for the education of the Norwegian king. This shows that there are other probably independent descriptions of werewolves around from the Middle Ages. It doesn’t mean werewolves were real, but that they were probably real to several medieval minds. In this thesis, it is human perception that is important, not what was real and not. Therefore, the belief that the werewolf was real has to be taken into account as part of people’s relationship with wilderness.

Werewolves are usually considered mythological creatures. The werewolf bearing the name of the lay in *Bisclaveret* enters “the vast forest and live in the deepest part of the wood where I feed off the prey I can capture”.<sup>50</sup> It is presented as a human becoming beast, or at least gaining animal traits, physically and mentally. On the other side, there is little indication that the werewolf is seen as extraordinarily dangerous as he flees to the forest to hide himself and to keep away from human witnesses while living off wildlife prey. It seems only natural that he, when turning into a werewolf, goes to the deepest parts of the forest to hide from other people. There seems to be two reasons: This is where he can hunt wild animals and stray humans without being seen doing so. It is also a place where his identity is kept secret to most other people. The forest to him is both a place of hunting and a place for effective hiding. The

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<sup>48</sup> Marie de France, *The Lais*, 72.

<sup>49</sup> Etchingam, Sigurðsson, Mhaonaigh, *Norse-Gaelic Contacts in a Viking World*, 51.

<sup>50</sup> Marie de France, *The Lais*, 69.

werewolf, is described in a natural manner, omitting its mythological qualities. Its existence is taken for granted.

In *Yonec* and in *Guigemar*, a magical portal into another realm exists at some end of the forest. In *Yonec*, the female protagonist is led by the blood trail of her beloved into a hill, ending up in his extremely wealthy realm where he finds her again.<sup>51</sup> In *Guigemar*, the protagonist finds himself on a lone ship on the shoreline magically drifting him off to a far-away land of immense wealth while he sleeps in a bed onboard.<sup>52</sup> Both events seem magical in that there is no logically explained way to the place they end up. They simply walk in one relatively ordinary place and end up in another extraordinary place. The wilderness in the two lays is enchanted. They are magical entities presenting themselves before the protagonists. This hints at a view that the wilderness can be enchanted, a place where unexplained experiences might happen.

## METAPHORIC AND MORALISTIC MEANINGS

Already in the introduction seemingly written by the original author, reflections of the author's view on wild elements are evident:

When a truly beneficial thing is heard by many people, it then enjoys its first blossom, but if it is widely praised its flowers are in full bloom.<sup>53</sup>

This is from the author's description of the acting out of gifts of talent distributed by God written in the prologue to *The Lais*. Even though it is a metaphor, it hints at an intimate view of flowers as part of nature, where flowers in full bloom are attributed to a talent shows its full potential to the world. The blooming process of flowers is related to human success as well. By that interpretation, a fully blooming flower is seen as a successful flower, while a flower in the early stages of blossom is only seen as a potential success. That would be the case for real non-metaphorical flowers as well, indicating an understanding of the fragility of nature as well as its potential. This excerpt might seem mundane, but an alternative metaphor, describing the same potential process of a human fulfilling his or her talent, could have referred to something human. Examples of such, non-naturalistic metaphors can be: "the foundation of a career is

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<sup>51</sup> Marie de France, *The Lais*, 90.

<sup>52</sup> Marie de France, *The Lais*, 45-46.

<sup>53</sup> Marie de France, *The Lais*, 41.



laid in its early stages of development, and if the foundation does not hold, the whole building will collapse". This is a basis for the other attributions to nature throughout *The Lais*. Wilderness is symbolic and inspirational to humans.

In the lay, *Chevrefoil*, when the protagonist Tristram hides in a forest waiting for an opportunity to contact his beloved woman, the queen, he has on the staff he makes a plant. It bears metaphorical meaning which is emphasised in the story. A honeysuckle plant growing on the stick is used to symbolise their relationship. If the honeysuckle is separated from the staff, both the queen and Tristram dies:

The two of them resembled the honeysuckle which clings to the hazel branch: when it has wound itself round and attached itself to the hazel, the two can survive together: but if anyone should then attempt to separate them, the hazel quickly dies, as does the honeysuckle.<sup>54</sup>

Again, parts of nature, of the wilderness, is used symbolically to pronounce meaning to human life. It is used to symbolise and decide the destiny of the two people. Tristram lay his destiny into the branch and the plant growing on it. This do not separate them from nature, but rather connects them to God's nature. As with the bestiary, meaning can be derived from observation of nature. There is also an enchanted sense of the plants in this story as well, in that they are intimately connected to the destiny of the two lovers.

In *Eliduc*, the servant of the protagonist's wife kills a weasel who is then revived by another weasel by putting an herb in its mouth.<sup>55</sup> This might seem simply obscure, but it carries some meaning. In the endnotes of the Penguin translated version used in this analysis, the translators, and editors of the lay suggest that the weasels are "a reflection of Eliduc's two ladies."<sup>56</sup> If that is the intention of the original author, it is an example of a metaphorical use of animals in a story said by the author to be true. The translator adds that "the red flower, which could be the verbena, is probably symbolic of the flow of blood and the restoration of life to the dead girl." If that is the case, the red flower is used in the same symbolic way as the weasels. In the *MS li.4.26* bestiary analysed in chapter two; the weasel had healing attributes.<sup>57</sup> It is beyond doubt that the weasel carried at least symbolic healing powers, but it might also

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<sup>54</sup> Marie de France, *The Lais*, 109-110.

<sup>55</sup> Marie de France, *The Lais*, 124.

<sup>56</sup> Burgess and Busby, *The Lais*, 128.

<sup>57</sup> *MS li.4.26*, 93.

have been believed to really have possessed such powers. This adds to the perceived enchanted nature of the wilderness, the home of the wild weasel.

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* carries moral and metaphoric meaning to its readers. The Green Knight in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is connected to nature, both metaphorically and mythologically. The Green Knight is described in a long description upon his entry into the feasting hall of king Arthur, the superior of Sir Gawain, one of the knights of the Round Table. At first impression, the description seems to describe a knight ennobled by Nature herself or at least some aspect of nature. His dominant colours are green and gold, his beard is described as bushy. He seems a knight of nature, of God's nature:

but in one hand he held a holly-bundle,  
that is greatest in greenery when groves are leafless,  
and an axe in the other, ugly and monstrous,  
a ruthless weapon aright for one rhyme to describe:  
the head was as large and as long as an ellwand,  
a branch of steel and of beaten gold...<sup>58</sup>

In one hand he held a holly-bundle, which is green in a grove where all other leaves are gone. In the other hand he held a "ruthless" axe. This might be a metaphor for the mixed impression of nature as both beautiful and ruthless to the medieval mind. The contrast between the holly-bundle and the axe might be interpreted as the contrasting features of nature: beauty and death. The holly-bundle is commonly known as a Christianised symbol as it symbolises Christ's crown of thorns and the berries the blood left by Christ for the salvation of humanity. The Green Knight says himself that it shows that he "pass as one in peace, no peril seeking."<sup>59</sup> The axe might have been interpreted literally or symbolically by the readers at the time. Its literary interpretation is that of aggression, since the knight has it in his hand and not sheathed on his horse or on himself. A symbolic interpretation, by the more analytical readers, might be as a symbol of John the Baptist's warning at the Baptism of Christ, as suggested by Kathryn Walls. John warns the spectators that the axe will fall on those who are not moral in their ways. She suggests that this is the interpretation the medieval audience would have of the axe.<sup>60</sup> It is hard

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<sup>58</sup> *Sir Gawain*, stanza 10.

<sup>59</sup> *Sir Gawain*, stanza 12.

<sup>60</sup> Walls, "The Axe in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*", 16-17.

to disagree, as it is the most significant symbolic attribution of the axe to the bible. The Green Knight can therefore be interpreted as a Christian symbol of justice by God. He is a judge coming to judge the morality of the court of king Arthur, and he is successful when he in the end finds Sir Gawain free of guilt despite his romantic adventure with the Green Knight's wife. The Green Knight is therefore a different mythological entity than the others found in this analysis. He is part of the 'enchanted forest' phenomenon, but he is also biblical in his symbolic meaning to the poem. It might be the case that the other mythological entities in *The Lais* were considered more Christian than what is explicitly expressed in the lays. But as this was not found, it cannot be concluded. From the analysis, only the Green Knight in *Sir Gawain* seems to have carried Christian symbolism.

## CONCLUSION

The romances present wilderness with several different perspectives, focusing on distinct characteristics and impressions of it. They were places connected with hunting, hiding, mystery, mythological appearances, and magical phenomena. These reflect the five sections of the analysis, focusing on what was found to be separate categories of representations of wilderness. As demonstrated, a combination of several kinds of relationships with the wilderness was found. The relationships do not seem to be specifically attributed to any one social group in medieval England. They are applicable to all. As all the analysed texts were popular at their time, it is conceivable that many would have knowledge of their contents without sufficient reading skills. On another note, the findings seem to be common conceptions to the time the texts were written. The authors did not come up with stories out of nowhere. They reflected common conceptions of their time. The degree of certainty applied here is relative to the possible degree of certainty for medieval studies. Very little of this age can be said for certain. Relative to that, the analysis shows common conceptions between two authors who certainly did not know each other. This strengthens the generalisation value of the findings.

Wilderness and forests as a whole were seen as deep and dark areas which could be dangerous while also allowing for hiding and hunting. They were described by both authors as deep and vast. They supposedly used mostly for hunting, but they were travelled through and hidden in. Wooded wilderness provided cover for those in need and food for hungry hunters and their acquaintances. It was the home of animal game, both regular and unnaturally huge as

the great boar in *Sir Gawain* or fearsome as the werewolf in *Bisclaveret*. Religious and mythological meaning was applied to certain wild animals, such as the weasel. Some animals were central to the storyline, either as catalysts or as the animal form of the protagonist. According to analysis of the romances, wilderness and forests were much more than the resource intensive areas everyone wanted access to reflected in the forest laws. They were the always-present background landscape and a place outside the daily life of civilisation.

Hunting is portrayed in several instances as an activity for the land-owning elite and their favoured subjects. It is an entertaining leisure activity which was largely done with respect for the wild creatures they hunted. Hunting was taken for granted as an activity for the elite and their selected subjects. Even though the forests were dark and grim at times, lords and kings were not afraid to hunt there. In *Bisclaveret*, it seems the king saw it as his responsibility to hunt down the dangerous werewolf. However, he respected it enough to give it the chance to beg for his mercy. The view on hunting at the time does not seem to be a view of humans as superior to all nature, but as part of nature. Responsibility for the preservation and protection of nature seems to have been expected.

There are two other findings that is of interest to the thesis. First, God is not explicitly mentioned in the romances analysed. To the medieval mind, God was present in all aspects of life. God was always there. Therefore, it is surprising that the romances do not touch upon this. God might be present between the lines and through a deeper understanding of the texts as is expressed in the bestiary. Second, Marie de France portrayed mythological entities and events as actually having happened. This may have contributed to and reflected a mystical relationship to the wilderness among medieval English people. Enchanted forests were certainly not new to the Middle Ages and would have existed before our period. The Breton lays Marie de France wrote were based on stories from probably before the eleventh century. The supposed reality of the contents of the lays might have been true to the perceptions of the time. Rational science was not yet developed, so belief in magic and other doubtful concepts were probably more common.

# CONCLUSION

The relationship people in Medieval England had with the wilderness, whether it was forests or woodlands, had several sides. It depended on who was asked, and which aspect of the wilderness was aimed at. These are related to the two questions asked of the sources. Although, in general, the wilderness was many things for different people. It was a hunting park, a place to hide, a source to divine meaning and material resources, and a dark and grim home to beasts and mythological beings. It was the focal point of the forest laws which more directly treated wilderness regulated by forest law rather than the whole wilderness. It was the subject of many entries in the bestiary through wild real and mythological beings. And it was central to the romance poems *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the *Lais of Marie de France*. A more detailed answer to the problem statement requires the answers to the two questions asked of the central primary sources.

The first question that was asked of the sources was: Which aspects of people's relationship with wilderness are reflected? People's relationships with the wilderness seem to have been dominated by a combination of practicality and spiritual meaning. According to the laws, there were several parties interested in the natural resources stored and produced in forests. The laws reflect purely practical concerns for wilderness, aiming at the royal forests. They do not show signs of the mythological and theological interpretations of forests as reflected in the romances and bestiary. The romances reflect the most nuanced descriptions of forests and their contents. The bestiary reflected the moral and natural meaning of the animals found in forests.

According to the analysis of forest law, the wilderness was, mostly as seigneurial or royal forests, a place to hunt animal game for sport and for food. That was the reason for the strict protection of the forests in England by forest law. The *Charter of the Forest* reflects that not only the monarch wanted unhindered access to wooded wilderness. The barons and their subjects also wanted a share of the royal forests, for travel, survival, pasture, and materials. The practical use of wilderness was in focus when writing the laws. The laws reflect largely material relationships with wilderness. They do not indicate any mystical or religious views.

Aside from this, royal ownership and power over wilderness designated as royal forests were taken for granted, however unpopular it ever was. Most wilderness in England had owners. People did not have reason to assume that the wild was open to anyone. It was typically land owned and regulated by someone, most often the king.

The attitudes toward wilderness as reflected in the bestiary is theological, moralising, understanding, and polarising between good and evil. The creatures that are morally judged are either described as evil or as good. This reflects a view that creatures are either good or evil to the medieval mind. On the other side, the bestiary demonstrates understanding of the nature of animals. They are often accepted as they are, reflecting the relatively high empathy for animals at the time. Animals and mythological creatures alike are applied a didactic moralistic meaning. That meaning is fundamental to their symbolic meaning. It seems animals were seen with a Christian moralistic interpretation, sometimes connecting them to biblical stories. The animal nature is allegorically connected to biblical messages which the clergy wanted to teach students. We cannot say for certain that this was the case with most people, only that it was the view among the clergy. Whether peasants saw weasels as vermin or symbols of healing is impossible to know, but it may have been the case considering the long tradition of the bestiaries and their contents.

The romances portray wilderness and wild animals in partly the same way as the bestiary. Wild animals are given symbolic meaning, as with the weasel, the white stag, and the honeysuckle plant. However, this is not as emphasised as in the bestiary, and they are not given explicitly religious Christian meaning. Empathy for animals, especially those considered more intelligent, is reflected in the romances as in the bestiary. Woodlands are portrayed as deep and vast lands suitable for hiding and hunting. The forests are on many occasions used for those purposes by the protagonists of the stories. Like the forest laws, the wilderness is described with emphasis on its material value to owners of forest land such as the lord of Wirral Castle in *Sir Gawain*. Hunting is a prestigious activity done for leisure time pleasure for land-owning people and those in their favour. The landowners seem to have been expected to preserve and protect their forests for the longevity of its resources.

There were some aspects of the relationships with forests which were not present in the laws. The laws did not mention or even hint at a mystical understanding of forests and the animals within. There are no laws against werewolves or hawks turning into knights, nor any mention of hidden portals or realms observed outside the confines of civilisation. There are

mentions about the clergy, but no laws regulating religious activity in the royal forests. What is not reflected in the forest laws are possible intimate relationships with forests. The laws reflect only practical aspects of the relationships. It is therefore necessary to include other primary sources in this thesis. Hunting in the forest was a dangerous sport. A hunting accident was the cause of death for king William Rufus in 1100 during a hunting expedition in the 'New Forest' in Hampstead. The laws do not reflect this danger in any way. They only reflect the greed of the royal household for hunting and other resource acquirement from use of forests. All these missing aspects are reflected to a larger degree in the sources analysed in chapter two and three.

None of the sources had much content to work with when looking for relationships to trees themselves. Trees were largely taken for granted in all the sources. The kinds of trees were sometimes emphasised, but with little elaboration. The meaning of trees may therefore have been largely what we saw Allison Million conclude in the introduction of this thesis. Trees may seem to have been largely of material value.

Conclusively then, it is reflected in these sources that to the medieval English mind, the forests could carry a combination of a range of different meanings. For some, the forests as a hunting ground were most prevalent, while for others, the material resources that could be extracted would be the essential function of the forest. For those choosing to take it seriously, the forest could also carry mystical and religious meaning: it could be enchanted as in the romances; it could be used as cover for things unwanted in society; and it could be a place in which great adventures were possible.

The second question asked of the sources was: Which social groups' relationships to the wilderness do they reflect? From the analysis it was found that the analysed sources reflected portions of the views of all the major social groups in English medieval society. The monarch, the nobility and aristocracy, the clergy, and the peasantry. The growing merchant 'class' was omitted as they are, in this context, not significantly different from the other social groups. Most of the findings are applicable only to the aristocracy, the clergy, and the monarch.

The king, being the primary lord of all English land, had his very own concerns about the forest lands he possessed. To his delight, the forests were his hunting ground, where he had exclusive, single-handed rights to hunt to the extent of his own satisfaction. However, being unable to be present everywhere at once, and the need for game meat by other people than himself, the king would distribute hunting rights to some of his subjects. The king would think

differently about forests than most in the peasantry. Although, in some respects they would probably think the same. They would both see forests as a mystical place where it was possible to encounter mythological beings and enchanted places. The reflected relationships with wilderness found in the sources analysed are applicable to a variable range of different people in different life situations. The kings did not have one single relationship with the wilderness. After a night of listening to the *Lais of Marie de France*, a king would probably emphasise more the mythological and mysterious aspects of the wilderness than he would normally do. Normally, the monarch, would most likely think of the wilderness as a source to resources and forests more specifically as an arena for recreation. Hunting for the most part.

What about the nobility and the aristocracy? They were the barons, the landowners, the rich and powerful. Their views were reflected in all the analysed sources. Many of them read the bestiary, the romances, and were at least acquainted with the forest laws. Therefore, their view of the wilderness was many-sided. According to the analysis of forest laws, they would see the wilderness, and forests more specifically, as a place for hunting, if they had the necessary individual rights. By the romances, their relationship with the wilderness would be sprinkled with romance and mythology. Whether they believed they would really meet a werewolf or a troll in the forest is not as important as their sense of enchantment when thinking of or wandering in the wild. As was the historical case with the Hereward the Wake, this layer of society would see the benefits of hiding in nature to avoid being seen. Hiding could be used both militarily, personally, and when hunting. From reading the bestiaries themselves, or by knowing their contents, they would be aware of the religious and symbolic value of nature and the animals living in it. They often used animals as symbolic objects to express some value or identity.

The clergy seems to have had a partly different relationship with wilderness. Their unique views are reflected only in the bestiary. There the efforts at finding meaning in God's creation are reflected in the mostly finished product. They sought meaning and divine guidance in wild creatures and objects. Understanding the creatures' personality was important, not in itself, but to precisely figure out its moral value to human. They could learn from nature. Other than that, the clergy seem to have had similar relations to the wilderness as the nobility and the aristocracy. They needed to travel through it safely while also being able to care for themselves on the road by hunting. The sources analysed reflects a limited part of the clergy and the Church's relationship with wilderness. As was mentioned, monastic houses often sought the wilderness as the ascetics did. None of the sources touched upon this. Other sources would



have to be analysed to further inquire about the Church and the clergy's relationships with the wilderness. Despite some literature on the subject, a project on this could be a valuable addition to the research on medieval environmental history.

The peasants' and the other lower social strata' relationships to wilderness are only possible to speculate. They are severely underrepresented in the analysed sources. This is a weakness to this analysis: That the sources are not the best to estimate the relationships to wilderness among the poor population. For that, archaeological research would probably prove more effective. To make the most of the analysed sources, some suggestions can be deducted. By indirect knowledge of the sources' contents, they would be formed by them, and they would probably share some of the views on wilderness with the other social groups. As briefly mentioned, sermons were sources for the poor to higher knowledge and understanding. For the poorer social groups, the wilderness might have been a place of myth as the myths in the sources are largely not unique to the sources analysed. They must also have been aware of the hunting that was going on in forests by the land-owning elite as they had to respect forest law. Therefore, their relations to wilderness would probably have been similar to that of the aristocracy, but with different roles in its exploitation.

I did not find any similar study using such different sources, contrasting the varying indications they provide. As stated in the introduction, the three kinds of sources are significantly different from each other. Despite this, they reflect similar attitudes towards wilderness and mental images of what it was to medieval people. The other studies that had a similar problem statement analysed one kind of source or the perspective of one social group. That limits the possible generalisation of the findings. The general findings of this thesis are not certain. They are suggestions for generalisation based on the findings of the analysis of all three kinds of sources. Relationships to wilderness that is not present in these sources according to the analysis are left out. The question asked of the sources was what they reflected, not what they not reflected. That would require too much time and effort for the limited size of this project. A further study might analyse other kinds of sources to increase the scope and precision of generalisation.

It is part of this conclusion that people in the Middle Ages were politically interested in the conservation of nature, despite different motivations than what modern politics have. This is a counterargument to environmental historian John Robert McNeill's claim introduced in the

introduction.<sup>1</sup> He argued that environmental interest groups are a phenomenon of the time of large-scale environmental concern since the 1880s. As we have seen, this is part correct and part incorrect. There were social groups in the English Middle Ages who were interested in the conservation of wilderness. However, the difference is the motive. It seems medieval people cared for nature mostly for its personal value to them, not for its own moral value.

The greenwood perspective discussed by Matt Cartmill is reflected in both romances analysed.<sup>2</sup> The wilderness is partly a place of a positive kind of magic and adventure. It tests the protagonists by putting them at trial or at the right path to a more moral life according to Christian values. The greenwood concept shines through the romances, adding weight to the results of the analysis in this thesis. However, the wilderness is not only portrayed in this positive light. They are also home to dangerous animals and mythological creatures. Evil also resides in the wild. This is contradicting Cartmill's argument. He is not wrong, but he is not completely right either.

## CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

Knowledge of medieval relationships with wilderness is useful to reflect upon contemporary relationships more effectively with wilderness. Seeing a change in how wilderness has been viewed by humans can make it easier to be more critical of contemporary views. This can be applied to most history. Our contemporary world view can be placed in a historical context to better understand how we think by comparing us to older generations. This was the initial inspiring thought behind this thesis. Historical conceptualisations of concepts we are familiar with sometimes inspire new thinking about our own conceptualisations.

Medieval forest law has, by some, been seen as an early version of contemporary environmental legislation. This does not respect the past as separate from our own view. The medieval English monarch wanted to preserve wilderness as royal forests. However, his motive was not environmental protection, valuing the environment by its self-worth. The king wanted to protect land he knew animal game needed to thrive and reproduce effectively. Ideally it was untouched by anyone he did not benefit from. The forests were protected, not for its own sake,

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<sup>1</sup> McNeill, "Observations on the Nature and Culture of Environmental History", 8.

<sup>2</sup> Cartmill, *Hunting and Nature Through History*, 75.

but for the sake of the hunt as a leisure activity among the privileged rich social groups. Forest law, therefore, cannot be equated to contemporary environmental law.

More detailed knowledge of human perceptions of nature may help contemporaries understand what can be done on a societal level to make humans act more environmentally friendly, heightening the efforts to exploit natural resources more sustainably. As we have seen, the motives for environmental protection at the time was personal gain and benefit, not care for the environmental through moral valuing of it. The human was the centre of attention in all the analysed sources, not the wilderness itself. The wilderness was the necessary landscape in which human activity played out, not interesting by itself.

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I list here the written works I have referred to in the text by footnotes and the sources I have consulted without the need for citations. The list consists of two categories of sources listed in this order: first the primary sources, then the cited secondary literature. Further, footnotes are not in their complete form, but in short form also at first mentions of references. See this bibliography for full reference.

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