RHETORICAL TRANSFORMATIONS OF TREES IN MEDIEVAL ENGLAND: FROM MATERIAL CULTURE TO LITERARY REPRESENTATION

Jodi Elisabeth Grimes, B.A., M.A.

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APPROVED:

Robert K. Upchurch, Major Professor
Nicole D. Smith, Committee Member
Jacqueline Vanhoutte, Committee Member
David Holdeman, Chair of Department of English
Sandra L. Terrell, Dean of the Robert B. Toulouse School of Graduate Studies

Literary texts of medieval England feature trees as essential to the individual and communal identity as it intersects with nature, and the compelling qualities and organic processes associated with trees help vernacular writers interrogate the changing nature of this character. The early depiction of trees demonstrates an intimacy with nature that wanes after the tenth-century monastic revival, when the representation of trees as living, physical entities shifts toward their portrayal as allegorical vehicles for the Church’s didactic use. With the emergence of new social categories in the late Middle Ages, the rhetoric of trees moves beyond what it means to forge a Christian identity to consider the role of a ruler and his subjects, the relationship between humans and nature, and the place of women in society.

Taking as its fundamental premise that people in wooded regions develop a deep-rooted connection to trees, this dissertation connects medieval culture and the physical world to consider the variety of ways in which Anglo-Saxon and post-Norman vernacular manuscripts depict trees. A personal identification with trees, a desire for harmony between society and the environment, and a sympathy for the work of trees lead to the narrator’s transformation in the *Dream of the Rood.* The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Junius 11 manuscript, illustrated in *Genesis A, Genesis B,* and manuscript images, scrutinizes the Anglo-Saxon Christian’s relationship and responsibility to God in the aftermath of the Fall. As writers transform trees into allegories in works like *Genesis B* and Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Parson’s Tale,* the symbolic representations retain their spontaneous, organic processes to offer readers a visual picture of the Christian interior—the heart. Whereas the *Parson’s Tale* promotes personal and
radical change through a horticultural narrative starring the Tree of Penitence and Tree of Vices, Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale* appraises the role of autonomous subjects in a tyrannical system. Forest laws of the post-Norman period engender a bitter polemic about the extent of royal power to appropriate nature, and the royal grove of the *Knight’s Tale* exposes the limitations of monarchical structures and masculine control and shapes a pragmatic response to human failures.
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One of the most frequent comments I’ve heard throughout my writing has been, “Why trees?” One of the underlying hypotheses of this dissertation is that the deeply compelling geographical and landscape features of one’s existence imprint themselves on one’s psyche. For my mother, it is Mount Hood emerging through the mist, for my father, the cornfields of Iowa. For me, these features are the llanos (grassy plains) of Colombia and the Amazonian rain forest.
of my childhood, where only the Vaupés River snaking its way toward Brazil interrupted the unending expanse of dense green treetops.

Although the long-since-gone trees of medieval England are a thousand years and a wide ocean away from my childhood home, I feel a deep affinity for them and for a people that at one time lived under or near their canopy. This dissertation is my tribute to their past existence. In the present, it is a tribute to my parents, who instilled in me the love of books and the world around me, and my husband, who has supported me unconditionally throughout this lengthy process.
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# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used throughout this dissertation.

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<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<td>ANQ</td>
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<td>ASE</td>
<td><em>Anglo-Saxon England</em></td>
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<td>ASPR</td>
<td><em>The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records: A Collective Edition</em></td>
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<td>CHRe</td>
<td><em>Chaucer Review: A Journal of Medieval Studies and Literary Criticism</em></td>
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<td>CSASE</td>
<td><em>Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England</em></td>
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<td>EEMF</td>
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<td>ELN</td>
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<td>MLQ</td>
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<td>NM</td>
<td><em>Neuphilologische Mitteilungen</em></td>
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<td>PLL</td>
<td><em>Papers on Language and Literature: A Journal for Scholars and Critics of Language and Literature</em></td>
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<td>PMLA</td>
<td><em>Publications of the Modern Language Association of America</em></td>
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Se halga towarp eac sum hæðengyld, and wolde aheawan ænne heahne pinbeam, se wæs ær gehalgod þam hæðenum godum. Ða noldon ða hæðenan þam halgan geðafian þæt he swa halig treow æfre hynan seoldæ. Ćwæd þeah heora án þæt he hit underfenge feallende to földan, and hí hit forcurfon, gif hé on God truwode þurh trumne geleafan. Ða geðafode Martinus þæt mid gebylde, and wearð gebunden under þam beame geset ðider ðe hé bigde mid healicum bogum, and næs him nán wen þæt hé ahwár wende buton to þám halgan, swa swa he ahyld wæs. Êwæt ða ða hæðenan aheowon þæt treow mid ormaetre blisse, þæt hit brastliende sáh to þám halgan were, hetelice swiðe. Ða worhte hé ongean þám hreosendum treowe þæs Hælendes rodetácn, and hit dærrihte æststód, wende ða ongean, and hreas underbæc, and fornean ofefoll ða ðe hit ær forcurfon. Ða awurpon ða hæðenan sona heora gedwyld, and to heora Scyppende sæmtinges gebugon mid micclum geleafan þurh Martines lare.¹

—Ælfric, “The Deposition of St. Martin, Bishop” (c. 990-95)²

[The saint also cast down an idol and wished to hew down a tall pine tree that previously had been hallowed to the heathen gods. Then the heathens would never allow the saint to fell so holy a tree. One of them said, however, that if the saint trusted in God through firm belief, he should catch the tree as it fell to earth, and they would cut it down. Then Martin consented to the plan with boldness and was placed bound under the tree where it leaned with high boughs, and not one of the pagans thought that it would turn anywhere but to the saint, just as it was bent. Then the heathens hewed the tree with excessive delight, so that it dropped crackling very violently toward the holy man. Then Martin made the sign of the Savior’s cross toward the falling tree, and it instantly stood still, turned back again, fell backwards, and very nearly dropped on those who had cut it down. Then the heathens immediately renounced their error, and immediately bowed to their Creator with great faith through Martin’s teaching.]

The anecdote above, in which Martin demonstrates the superior power of the Christian God and his symbolic tree over the pagan deities and their sacred pine, embodies a turning point in the representation of trees in medieval England. As a general rule, the early Anglo-Saxon depiction of trees demonstrates a certain intimacy with nature that wanes after the tenth-century monastic revival, when the representation of trees as living, physical entities begins to shift toward their portrayal as allegorical vehicles for the Church’s didactic use. For Ælfric, the

¹ CHII 34.161-77. CHI and CHII are cited by item and line number. Spelling, capitalization, and punctuation have been regularized where appropriate. All Old English translations are my own unless otherwise noted.
² For dating, see CHIII, xxxii-xxxv.
Anglo-Saxon affinity for trees as physical objects, even the biblical trees of Paradise and the
cross, is too reminiscent of pagan practices. His emphasis on the importance of trees as symbols
rather than objects of worship lays the groundwork for an increasing allegorization of trees in the
post-Benedictine world. Ælfric, who warns his audience to pray to the Lord and the cross but
not to the tree, manifests the post-Benedictine denunciation of deifying or worshipping trees.
Such pagan practice is common enough to codify. Writing only decades after Ælfric, Cnut
outlaws the deification of such natural objects as the sun, moon, fire, water, springs, stones, and
forest trees, and understandably some Christian writers of this period are careful to avoid any
appearance of nature worship or even an excessive identification with nature.

It is noteworthy that the inherent worth of the pine tree is irrelevant within Ælfric’s
homily. Gillian Rudd argues that when textual trees appear “only in terms of the use to which
they will be put eventually by humans,” an author exhibits an “anthropocentric attitude, which
denies trees any intrinsic value.” The pagan worshippers venerate the tree as a religious token
that, although hallowed to their deities, can be sacrificed with ormaetrebilisste (“excessive
delight”) in anticipation of Martin’s death. The pine itself reflects the character of the pagans as

3 For a summary of Ælfric’s teaching on magic and superstitious practices, see Audrey Meaney, “Ælfric and

4 See *Dominica IX post Pentecosten* (“The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost”) in CHII 26.47-59. Writing of the good
and evil trees described in the New Testament parable, Ælfric stresses the figurative nature of the account, adding
that Jesus is not speaking of material trees *be on appel-tune wexad* (“which grow in a fruit-garden”) and are *lifleas,
sawulleas, and andgitleas* (“lifeless, soulless, and senseless”).

5 See *Dominica V in Quadragesima* (“The Fifth Sunday in Lent”) in CHII 13.290-93: “Datere halgan rode tácn is ure
bletsung, and to datere rode we ús gebiddad, na swa ðeah to ðam treowe, ac to ðam Ælmihtigum Drihtne ðe on ðære
halgan róde for ús hängode.” [The sign of the holy cross is our blessing, and we pray to the cross, not to the tree, but
to the Almighty Lord who hung on the holy cross for us.]

30, for a brief discussion of Ælfric’s teaching on the sun, moon, stars, water, earth, stones, and trees in connection
with idolatry.

7 *Greenery: Ecocritical Readings of Late Medieval English Literature* (Manchester and New York: Manchester
University Press, 2007), 52 and 53, respectively.
it crashes *hetelice swiðe* (literally, “very hatefully”) toward the saint who counters the tree’s plummet with the *rode-tacen* (“cross-sign”). The symbolic tree defies the laws of nature by subordinating the pine to its will. The pine tree for Martin is emblematic of the erroneous pagan belief system, and the tree must be destroyed in order for the people to embrace the new faith.

Although Ælfric radically condenses the “voluminous materials available on St. Martin,” his choice to include this passage, closely followed from Sulpicius Severus’s *Vita Sancti Martini* (c. 397), marks a significantly different attitude toward pagan objects from that taken by the earliest missionaries to England. An early seventh-century letter from Pope Gregory to Augustine about the advisability of not destroying pagan temples illustrates the contrast. Noting that pagan ritual can be used to further Christianity, Gregory commands that altars and relics should replace idols in the temples formerly used for pagan worship and sacrificial rituals.9 Gregory’s decision to transform sites associated with paganism into Christian churches resonates in early Old English poems like *The Dream of the Rood*, in which a forest tree, a material object at times associated with heathen practice, is venerated as the holy cross, a religious icon. Several centuries later, however, Ælfric’s celebration of St. Martin’s uncompromising stance concerning the pine tree reflects a more hard-line approach to pagan customs, an approach reflected in Cnut’s early eleventh-century prohibition on nature worship.

Ælfric is not the subject of this dissertation, but he stands—along with trees—at the center of it. An English abbot of the monastic reform’s second generation, he remembers Britain’s pagan past that has not altogether vanished, is a member of its ardent Christian present, and prefigures a time when Protestant reformers will use the vernacular to wrest power from the

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8 CHIII, 622. For the source text, see 629.
clergy and give literate lay men and women a sense of control over their own religious lives. His
description of St. Martin’s use of a symbolic tree—the sign of the cross—to overcome another
very real, albeit consecrated, pine tree illustrates a similar trajectory reflected in the “relationship
between literature and the physical environment,” particularly trees, from the age of the Anglo-
Saxons through the late medieval period. Although this complex relationship cannot be reduced
into simplistic terms, generally it is true that among other factors, the Church’s growing
influence changes the ways in which the medieval English imagine trees—and themselves—
across the period. As in Ælfric’s homily, earlier generations, represented by the unconverted
pagans who revere the pine tree, are closer to the earth because of a blend of Christian and
Germanic traditions that fashioned “a mystical view of nature.” The inclination of the pagans to
view trees like the lofty, high-boughed pine as hallowed and worthy of preservation lingers in
early Old English poems such as The Dream of the Rood, where the veneration of trees dedicated
to pagan gods transfers to the cross as a tree imbued with the power of the Christian God. This
type of inclination is problematic for Ælfric in the late tenth century as it had been in his Latin
source six centuries before. The material pine is subordinate to a symbolic representation of the
cross—and because of its connection to paganism, its destruction is considered necessary.

Although Ælfric’s treatment of the pine tree hearkens to a time before Gregory when the Church
harshly dealt with pagan objects and sites, his use of the vernacular foreshadows a time in which
lay authors and readers will espouse the rhetoric of trees, religious interpretation offering only
one of multiple literary perspectives.

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Certainly, the physical importance of trees from the beginning of recorded English history is well documented in texts of the eighth and ninth centuries. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* demonstrate that wooded areas offer a place of escape or strategic battleground for the native inhabitants warring against Roman, Saxon, Viking, and Norman invaders. With their natural topographical boundaries, forests slow the diffusion of language and religion or even the access of foreign armies. Wooded areas provide suitable locations for monasteries and economic benefit for monastic houses. Trees serve as battleground markers, clerical meeting places, and indications of the country’s economic wealth or distress. Long before Chaucer is appointed by Richard II as deputy forester of the royal forest at North Petherton, the control and management of forested areas has become a highly organized industry.

People in forested regions develop a connection to trees that informs their personal, social, and national identities, and certainly, this is the premise for most if not all ecocritics. Cheryll Glotfelty, for example, asserts that “all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it.” Because trees are a dominant feature of medieval England’s landscape and economy, they often find their way into the manuscripts of both politicians and poets. Kings legislate the use of forests and assign material value to trees, while writers (and iconographers) capitalize on their religious symbolism and physical associations.

In analyzing these literary representations of trees, it is important to reconnect each image as a concrete object with its associations and to consider its symbolisms and associations in the

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13 Ecocriticism Reader, xix.
context of its existence in time and place. Accordingly, this dissertation contemplates how the material culture of trees, as evidenced by historical, legal, and medical documents and archaeological evidence, influences the ways in which trees are depicted from the eighth century through the fourteenth century. Because the tree is a natural, familiar entity in medieval England, it resonates for a lay audience as well as the clergy. Thus, I have focused on a selection of vernacular writings across the period as I explore the connection between medieval culture and the physical world of trees.

Despite the significance—and preponderance—of trees in medieval England’s physical and cultural landscape, this study is the first to use an interdisciplinary approach to examine patterns of representation of trees—material, biblical, allegorical, political, and gendered—in a number of vernacular English manuscripts from the Anglo-Saxon period through the late fourteenth century. Existing scholarship tends toward ecological or historical investigations, symbolic methods, or focused examinations of particular types of trees. For example, Oliver Rackham’s archaeological study, *Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape*, discusses the biology and management of trees in medieval England, while Laura Rival’s collection, *The Social Life of Trees: Anthropological Perspectives on Tree Symbolism*, investigates the symbolism of trees in a variety of cultures.14 Whereas Rackham and Rival draw upon archaeological and anthropological methodologies, Sharon Ann Coolidge and Éamonn Ó Carragáin examine particular types of trees in European medieval literature.15 More brief and specialized works such as Anthony Annunziata’s “‘Tree Paradigms in the Merchant's Tale,’” David Raybin’s “‘Manye been the weyes’: The Flower, Its Roots, and the Ending of *The

Canterbury Tales," and Krista Sue-Lo Twu’s "Chaucer's Vision of the Tree of Life: Crossing the Road with the Rood in the Parson's Tale" investigate the treatment of trees in specific literary texts. Perhaps the closest counterpart to this study—although it came to my attention after the majority of my work was completed—is Gillian Rudd’s new book, *Greenery: Ecocritical Readings of Late Medieval English Literature*, which examines trees in the *Knight's Tale* and the *Parliament of Fowls* within a broader ecocritical study of the earth, trees, wilderness, sea, and gardens and fields. Yet as Rudd acknowledges, her book necessarily is “a conglomerate of some of the attitudes toward nature,” and its wide range of landscape features and limitation to the late medieval period and ecocritical premises precludes a more expansive analysis of the rhetoric of trees in medieval English literature.

Such an analysis challenges the conventional view that uncultivated wooded areas were feared by the medieval English as dangerous and chaotic natural spaces. V. A. Kolve, for example, summons Bartholomaeus Anglicus, an early thirteenth-century Franciscan encyclopedist whose wood, among many other more positive attributes, is a “place of deceipte and of huntynge,” “hydynge and of lurkynge,” and “theves.” In his discussion of *The Knight's Tale*, Kolve acknowledges that Bartholomaeus offers some positive analyses of wooded areas, but he asserts that Chaucer’s grove corresponds with the “other (and perhaps deeper) medieval

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17 See note 7, above.

18 Rudd, 16.

sense of such places as potentially perilous, beyond law, antithetical to human values.”

Certainly this view resonates in a handful of medieval English depictions spanning the period, from *Beowulf*’s “hrinde bearwas,” the frost-covered grove overlooking Grendel’s mere, to Richard Rolle’s *The Pricke of Conscience* (c. 1349 AD), which compares the world to a forest in a wild country full of thieves. However, as Rudd and others have cautioned, sweeping generalizations about nature across the medieval period offer at best only a partial analysis. Such observations about trees and wooded areas should be balanced by evidence that the physical nature of forests in medieval England was more beneficial and hospitable to its inhabitants than once was believed.

This dissertation unites a variety of methodologies, using ecology, archaeology, anthropology, sociology, new historicism, and feminism combined with close readings to explore how, and in what contexts, medieval manuscripts speak about trees from the Anglo-Saxon period through the fourteenth century. While this study is more wide-ranging than previous work on the subject of trees in medieval England, its focal point is in the intersection of the material culture of trees with literary representations in Anglo-Saxon and post-Norman vernacular prose and poetry. Highlighting vernacular works that offer diverse but well-elaborated perspectives of trees, the chapters each feature a representative text moving from the early Anglo-Saxon period through the late Middle Ages: the rood-tree in *The Dream of the Rood*, rooted in the cross tradition of the seventh through ninth centuries, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the late tenth or early eleventh-century Junius manuscript, the allegorical Tree of Vices and Tree of

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20 Kolve, 111.


23 See, for example, Rudd, 16-17.
Penitence in *The Parson’s Tale*, derived from early thirteenth-century sources and an even earlier tradition, and the politicized grove of the late fourteenth-century *Knight’s Tale*.

While early Anglo-Saxon poets demonstrate an intimacy with nature through imagery and prosopopoeia or simplify theological doctrines related to biblical trees using contrast or juxtaposition, writers in late Anglo-Saxon and post-Conquest England frequently allegorize trees for homiletic purpose. Where the biblical tree of Paradise and the cross are fascinating subjects for earlier English generations, Trees of Vices and Virtues, in particular, become popular didactic tools after the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 formalizes confession and lay instruction, as Chaucer’s *Parson’s Tale* demonstrates. In the fourteenth century also emerges a discourse regarding the economic value of trees that not only recalls the value Anglo-Saxon writers and kings put on trees but also highlights new social tensions between a king and his subjects and between men and women. One place in which these related discourses are played out is *The Knight’s Tale*, where Chaucer uses trees to engage power and gender. The forest laws of the post-Norman period provoke a bitter polemic about the extent of royal power to appropriate nature, and the emerging middle class raises questions about the place of women in English society that Chaucer addresses by associating trees and wooded areas with gender.

Chapter two, “The Forest’s Edge: The Cross’s Origin in *The Dream of the Rood*,” argues that the *Dream* poet’s personal identification with the cross, its origin, and its place in society arises out of the close connection the Anglo-Saxon English share with their trees and forests. In reading the poem through the cultural context of trees, displayed primarily through historical and legal writings of the period that demonstrate the economic importance of trees, I suggest a misuse of nature that aligns the reader with the rood-tree against the cross’s “enemies.” While Alfred in the Preface to his translation of Augustine’s *Soliloquies* compares his selection of
books for his translation program to an individual’s careful selection of trees for appropriate use, the *Dream* poet emphasizes the careless disregard shown by the cross’s enemies in their exploitation of nature. The sympathy the poet feels for the cross arises from an Anglo-Saxon respect for trees used properly and an aversion to their misuse.

As in the *Dream*, some of the Exeter Book riddles characterize the various uses and abuses of trees, at times animating objects derived from trees through prosopopoeia. These wooden objects, like the rood-tree, voice a reluctance to serve man’s evil purpose. The poems imply that humans violate the innate goodness of trees when they are fashioned for evil purpose. Other Old English poems, specifically *Resignation*, *Maxims I*, and *Maxims II*, exhibit the Anglo-Saxons’ longing for harmony with nature and distaste for the violation of the natural order seen in the *Dream*. Overall, the portrayal of trees in these works suggests a sympathy for nature and the works of nature. Reading the *Dream* in connection with other Old English poems from an ecocritical perspective sheds light on the Anglo-Saxon poet’s perception of his personal and social identity as a Christian. By appealing to the medieval reader’s sympathy for trees and the work of trees, the poet prepares the medieval reader to emulate the tree’s transformation.

Chapter three, “The Deadly Tree of Paradise: The Problem of Evil in the Junius 11 Manuscript,” examines the way in which the depiction of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the late tenth or early eleventh-century Junius 11 manuscript moves toward allegory and away from the sympathetic, dynamic portrayal of trees found in much of the Old English corpus. The Junius manuscript contains distinct representations of the biblical tree in three integrated texts: *Genesis A* of the early eighth century, the more original *Genesis B*, a ninth-century translation and interpolation of an older Saxon poem, and nine manuscript illustrations relevant to the Tree of Knowledge. The texts and illustrations comprising the manuscript, along with the
patristic and homiletic background including Augustine’s *De Genesi ad Litteram* (The Literal Meaning of Genesis) and Ælfric’s “On the Beginning of Creation,” demonstrate that the meaning of the biblical tree is itself contested. For example, the author of *Genesis A*, who focuses on Eve’s act of enmity, robbery, and greed rather than the Tree itself, seems most interested in theological accuracy. The *Genesis B* poet depicts the biblical tree (renamed the Tree of Death) as an evil and visibly unattractive object that contrasts sharply with the Tree of Life. Portraying the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil as the source of evil in the world raises the problem of God’s role in the creation of evil. The Junius illustrator offers a third depiction of the Tree of Knowledge. Like the *A* poet, he emphasizes the actions of Adam and Eve in relation to the trees instead of focusing on the Tree itself. He adds a new, patristic element to the portrayal, however, by suggesting that the Fall is related to sexual temptation and the lack of sexual restraint.

Although the various depictions of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Junius manuscript mark the presence of competing biblical interpretations, the composite portrayal reveals a didactic, theological purpose. The composite Tree of Knowledge demonstrates the importance of submitting to God’s authority, even in small things. The manuscript suggests that nature itself is deceptive and not to be trusted. As such, the manuscript distances the biblical tree from the positive portrayal found in Anglo-Saxon writings, particularly the poems of the Exeter and Vercelli manuscript discussed in chapter two.

The tendency toward arboreal allegory seen in the Junius manuscript becomes a mature tradition by the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. At the end of the period, Chaucer’s works of “moralitee, and devocioun” share the post-Benedictine tendency to allegorize trees.24 Chapter four, “The Tree of Penitence and the Tree of Vices: The Parson’s Narrative of Transformation,”

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focuses on Chaucer’s *Parson’s Tale*, which features Trees of Penitence and Vices. The literary and iconographic tradition of Trees of Vices, which develops from patristic and theological writings widely read and studied in medieval England, includes the *De fructibus carnis et spiritus* (“concerning carnal and spiritual fruit”) of the early twelfth century, *Vices and Virtues*, an early thirteenth-century dialogue, and *The Book of Vices and Virtues* (c. 1375), an English translation of Friar Laurent’s *Somme le Roi*. In the *Parson’s Tale*, the late fourteenth-century poet moves away from the binary structure of conventional teachings on the allegorical and biblical trees toward a more complex narrative of salvation offering a constructive and functional doctrinal paradigm for his readers. I demonstrate the originality of the *Tale* through a comparison of the arrangement and depiction of the vices to the *Summa Vitiorum*, Chaucer’s thirteenth-century source for this section of the *Tale*, and iconographic representations of the period, including illustrations in manuscripts of the widely circulated *Speculum Virginum*, an early twelfth-century dialogue, and Robert de Lisle’s fourteenth-century Psalter.

Medieval English horticulture and tree replacement methods demonstrate the suitability of Chaucer’s alterations from one of his main sources, Raymund of Pennaforte’s thirteenth-century *Summa de poenitentia*. Chaucer’s primary change is to transform penitence from a metaphorical journey to a tree consisting of contrition (the roots), confession (the stalk, branches, and leaves), and satisfaction (the fruit). Chaucer’s depiction is unique in his juxtaposition of the Tree of Vices with the Tree of Penitence rather than with the Tree of Virtues. Although the opposing virtues are enumerated as individual remedies in the *Tale*, the Tree of Vices with its extensive series of branches and twigs seems to overshadow the virtues, the cross, and even the Tree of Penitence. The Tree of Vices thus threatens the project of the entire *Tale*. The simplicity with which Chaucer describes the Tree of Penitence, however, in comparison with the Tree of
Vices and its tangle of branches and twigs, reminds his reader that while each individual is in some way associated with vice, disentanglement from that tree is as simple as contrition and confession. Chaucer’s decision not to incorporate the remedies in the form of the Tree of Virtues allows the Tree of Penitence to stand in direct opposition to the vices. In other words, becoming virtuous is not a prerequisite to salvation in the Tale. Rather, the Tree of Penitence provides a simple and direct way of reaching God.

The fifth chapter, “Reading the Knight’s Tale against Medieval Forest Law: The Politics of Theseus’s Royal Grove,” associates trees with political and social power by relating historical writing, laws, wills, and charters to Chaucer’s depiction of trees in The Knight’s Tale. Chaucer’s work throughout his life provides ample evidence that trees are indeed significant to his oeuvre. The allegorical trees of The Parson’s Tale, discussed in chapter four, shape a horticultural narrative that offers a paradigm for the salvation process and a model for the human existence. Shades of arboreal allegory persist in The Pardoner’s Tale, which features an oak tree that Lee Patterson has called an arboretus, the unfruitful fig tree of the gospels, in order to mark the place where the three rioters find death. The Nun’s Priest’s Tale, a beast fable, abandons allegorical trees for literal associations with refuge and danger, while The Tale of Sir Thopas and The Merchant’s Tale position trees as images of sexual fecundity. Building upon the tree as a sign of sexuality, The Book of the Duchess and The Parliament of Fowls in turn expand understandings of wooded areas to include memory, imagination, and love. These various figurations of verdant imagery attest to the value that Chaucer places on trees and wooded areas across his corpus.

One of the major settings of *The Knight’s Tale*, a grove, is neither idealized nor allegorical but is rather the material representation of a royal forest. English texts of the period reveal that forest laws, which place a burden on commoners and sometimes even aristocrats through the late Anglo-Saxon and post-Norman period, were associated with the “arbitrary authority” of kings. Chaucer’s familiarity with the economics and politics of royal forests is a factor in his representation of trees in *The Knight’s Tale* as compared to his source texts, Boccaccio’s *Teseida* and Statius’s *Thebiad*. Reading the *Knight’s Tale* through the framework of royal forest law and contemporary literary works that engage the forest controversy, such as the *Tale of Gamelyn* and the Robin Hood ballads, reveals Chaucer’s subtle criticism of the duke’s tyranny as well as the complex relationship between a ruler and the people.

As a material, physical space, the grove of *The Knight’s Tale* becomes a sentient force that tolerates human presence but also suffers from it. In its encounter with the Theban cousins, for example, the grove seems to accommodate human desire, which when unrestrained, threatens Duke Theseus’s supremacy. Theseus’s subsequent destruction of the grove is symbolic of the unrest present within his kingdom as well as his initial unwillingness to accept his own lack of control over the situation, a hypothesis supported in Laura Rival’s work delineating how trees are representative of “community welfare and prosperity.” Theseus appears twice as the agent of the trees’ destruction, yet in his political failures he comes to terms with the impossibility of governing predestined events. In his “Firste Movere” speech, the duke associates the oak tree with humanity, presenting the tree as an example of the natural course of life and death. Only after he accepts the supremacy of nature rather than violently suppressing it is he able to make

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“vertu of necessitee” (I.3042) and take steps to promote the future peace of his kingdom through the marriage of Palamon and Emelye. The Tale thus asserts that while rulers and political structures are fallible, trees model resilience, survival, pragmatism, and reconciliation, and thereby offer an appropriate paradigm of behavior for both rulers and subjects.

Literary texts of the Middle Ages feature trees as essential to both the individual and communal identity in a changing society, and the compelling qualities and organic processes associated with trees help vernacular writers explore the changing nature of this character. By throwing into relief the role of trees in these texts, from the Dream of the Rood, which explores the narrator’s transformation as a Christian through his identification with the cross, to The Knight’s Tale, which interrogates the role of autonomous subjects in a tyrannical system, I hope to accomplish three major goals. First, by employing a variety of theoretical approaches to explore the rhetoric of trees in medieval English literature, I suggest fresh ways of reading these texts that complement the existing scholarship. Second, I aim to illustrate how vernacular writers use trees across the period to engage shifting ideas about society, theology, nature, power, and gender. Finally, I want to show how medieval studies can embrace ecocriticism. With its wide range of texts that feature trees in biblical, allegorical, and material discourses, medieval literature provides an opportunity for scholars to draw on ecocritical theory. Ecocriticism, most often applied to modern and post-modern studies, in turn can reconsider its own theoretical positions through the context of medieval texts. This dissertation, which examines the most significant vernacular medieval English works about trees, therefore represents an original contribution to medieval studies that will provoke new questions about these and other texts.
CHAPTER 2

THE FOREST’S EDGE: THE CROSS’S ORIGIN IN THE DREAM OF THE ROOD

Þæt wæs geara iu, (ic þæt gyta geman),
Þæt ic wæs aheawen holtes on ende,
astyred of stefne minum. Genaman me ðær strange feondas,
geworhton him þær to wæfer-syne, heton me heora wergas hebban.¹

[That was long ago—I remember that yet—
that I was hewn on the forest’s edge,
removed from my root. Strong enemies lay hold of me there,
then wrought a spectacle for themselves, commanded me to raise their criminals.]

That a cross is featured in The Dream of the Rood (the Dream) is not surprising. The cult of the cross was flourishing through all of Christendom by the seventh century, and in Anglo-Saxon England, the cross had become “an all-pervasive symbol of ecclesiastical life” by this time.² What is unique, though, is that the religious object not only is personified but also is depicted as a tree. It is the living plant—in its natural state—that is the concern of this chapter. In the stunning first sentence of the cross’s first-person narrative of suffering and transformation, cited above, the syllicre treow (“most excellent tree,” 4) provides a personal history that not only establishes itself as a heroic character in the poem but also creates a point of origin at the holtes on ende (“forest’s edge,” 29). The cross itself of course has strong connotations for the medieval Christian reader, but by rooting its history in a natural space significant to the Anglo-Saxon existence, the poet capitalizes on the close connection the medieval English share with their trees

¹ Michael Swanton, The Dream of the Rood (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970), 91, lines 28-31. All citations from the Dream in this chapter are from this edition, although the macrons found in Swanton have not been reproduced. Exeter Book citations are from The Exeter Book, ed. George Philip Krapp and Elliot Van Kirk Dobbie, vol. 3 of ASPR (1936; reprint, New York: Columbia University Press, 1966). Citations from the Dream and the Exeter Book hereafter are cited parenthetically by line number. All Old English translations throughout this chapter are my own unless otherwise noted.

² Swanton, Dream, 47. Swanton demonstrates that the Invention tradition is well known in eastern churches by the end of the fourth century. See also 44-45.
and forests. In this chapter, I argue that a thorough examination of the material context and literary culture of trees in Anglo-Saxon England calls attention to the medieval reader’s personal identification with the cross, its origin, and its place in society. The Anglo-Saxon context suggests that the cross’s enemies violate the desired harmony between society and the environment. Accordingly, the poet manifests sympathy for trees and the work of trees that extends to the cross/tree in the poem.

The poet’s placement of the tree at the forest’s edge differs from the traditions of the cross’s origin that trace the cross to the Tree of Life and/or to three trees, descended from the paradisal tree and representative of the Trinity. Most of the evidence of these traditions in England post-dates the Vercelli manuscript by at least a century and the earliest possible composition date of 700 A.D. for the Dream by three centuries. Earlier sources, however,

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4 See Stevens, who summarizes legends relating to the wood of the cross at 12-15, and 67; and Richard Morris, Legends of the Holy Rood; Symbols of the Passion and Cross-Poems, no. 46 (London: Oxford, 1871), 154-55. “The Invention of the Holy Cross” is found in Volume 3 of Jacobus Voragine’s popular late thirteenth-century Legenda aurea, translated into English by William Caxton in 1483 A.D. A Middle English poem also dated from the late thirteenth century and existing in several versions alters a few elements concerning the cross’s origin, connecting the cross to three seeds of an apple from the Tree of Life (Morris, Legends of the Holy Rood, viii). Another Middle English legend from Harleian MS 4196 specifies that the three trees that form the cross are cedar, cypress, and pine (62-86). MS Bodley 343, written between 1150 and 1175, brings us even closer in date to the Vercelli manuscript. At least six versions are associated with the “History of the Holy Rood-Tree,” and the original was most likely written as early as the beginning of the eleventh century but no later than the early twelfth century [Arthur S. Napier, History of the Holy Rood-tree: A Twelfth Century Version of the Cross-legend, with Notes on the Orthography of the Ormulum and A Middle English Compassio Mariae, EETS, no. 103 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1894), xi].

5 Critics generally agree that the Vercelli manuscript was transcribed around 1000 and that the poem was composed between 700-850. For manuscript dating, see Albert S. Cook, The Dream of the Rood: An Old English Poem Attributed to Cynewulf (Oxford: Clarendon, 1905); Bruce Dickins and Alan S. C. Ross, The Dream of the Rood (1934; reprint, London: Methuen, 1963); Michael Swanton, Dream of the Rood; Barbara C. Raw, The Art and Background of Old English Poetry (New York: St. Martin's, 1978). For dating of the poem, see Derek Pearsall, Old English and Middle English Poetry (London: Routledge, 1977), and Swanton, Dream, 39.
demonstrate that nascent legends about the cross’s origin are contemporary with the Vercelli manuscript and even the earliest date for the poem. For instance, Riddle 55 in the Exeter Book, transcribed about the same period as the Vercelli manuscript, uses a first person observer to describe a wooden sword-rack reminiscent of the cross:6

\[
\text{ond rode tacn, } \text{hæs us to roderum up} \\
\text{hlædre rærde, } \text{ær he helwara burg abræce.}
\]

(5-6)

[a sign of the cross, of the one who raised a ladder to the heavens for us, before he conquered the city of Hell.]

The poet introduces the cross-shaped object as a *wraetlic wudutreow* (“wondrous forest tree,” 3). Rather than originating from a single tree from the forest, however, as does the cross in the *Dream*, the sword-rack derives from four native English species: yew, holly, maple, and oak (9-10).7 This concept of the cross’s construction from several species of trees belongs to early legend. The Northumbrian Bede (c. 673-735), “following the pseudo-Chrystotom’s inference from Isaiah lx. 13 that [Christ’s cross] was made up from cypress, cedar, pine, and box,” alludes to the composition of the cross from different types of wood.8 The earliest incarnation of the *Dream*, runes on the Ruthwell Cross monument, suggests that the cross’s conventional

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connection to the Tree of Life is widely known in early Anglo-Saxon England. Images evocative of the paradisal tree accompany the runic text.

Given the importance the early church places on the cross, it is likely that the Dream poet knew of the tradition connecting the cross to the Tree of Life and several different types of wood but chose not to feature it in his poem. Ó Carragáin posits that the poet rejects the traditional material of the cross’s “noble ancestry” in order to parallel the cross’s origin with the humble origin of Christ. Michael Swanton, in contrast, considers the “use of the simple, natural tree” as an allusion to “contemporary representations in which the cross is seen as the burgeoning stem of the Tree of Life.” Of course, it is impossible to prove that the poet knew of the cross’s legendary descent from the Tree of Life. However, the fact remains that the poet’s choice to position the cross as an otherwise ordinary tree at the edge of the forest impacts the text by adding to the reader’s sympathy at the violence of the rood-tree’s removal while also paralleling the death of Christ, the root of Jesse, in the poem. To date, no critic has explored thoroughly the ways in which the poet’s depiction of the cross as a tree would resonate with an Anglo-Saxon audience deeply reliant on wooded areas. James Fernandez, an ethnographer who works with social groups in forested areas, writes that people who live in or near wooded regions develop a connection to trees that results in a “sense of similarity between trees and themselves and trees and their body social and body politic.” In the Dream, this “sense of similarity” between the

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9 The Ruthwell cross is generally dated in the late seventh or early eighth century. See Swanton, 9, and Ó Carragáin, 213, 283, and 284. Swanton suggests three possible relationships between the Ruthwell runic text and the Dream: the Dream was inspired by an original poetic inscription on the Ruthwell cross, the cross sculptor adapted text from an earlier version of the Dream, or the sculptor modified a version very similar to the Vercelli poem (39).

10 See Ó Carragáin, 48-49, 285-87; Swanton, Dream, 13.

11 Ritual and the Rood, 2. See also 314.

12 Dream, 69.

Christian reader and the tree that constructs the cross lies at the forest’s edge, the primary location of Anglo-Saxon settlement.

The Anglo-Saxon Context: Personal Identifications

In order to understand why the Anglo-Saxon poet uses the detail of the cross’s origin to evoke a personal connection to the tree in the *Dream*, it is first necessary to examine briefly the material, political, and economic contexts of trees and wooded areas in pre-Conquest England. For this theoretical framework, I follow Owain Jones and Paul Cloke in *Tree Cultures: The Place of Trees and Trees in their Place* in using the term *arboriculture*, defined as “the meanings that orbit around trees and woods in culture.” The poem’s arboriculture, which, for the most part, favorably honors trees as elemental and essential landscape features, can be reconstructed through historical texts such as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, and Anglo-Saxon charters and law codes. Even a cursory background on the arboriculture of Anglo-Saxon England is sufficient to demonstrate that in the opening lines of the cross’s narrative in the *Dream*, many associations that resonate for the medieval reader—such as the connection of trees with subsistence, sanctuary, and economic and political power—are lost to modern urban society. These associations fuel a sense of empathy with the cross, a deeper understanding of Christ’s sacrifice, and a personal and transformative compunction.

Examined through the context of Anglo-Saxon arboriculture, the positioning of the tree at the forest’s edge parallels the origin of the medieval reader. Anglo-Saxon settlements, generally speaking, are scattered at the periphery of wooded areas, which are both prominent topographical

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14 Jones and Cloke use the hyphenated term “arbori-culture” (Oxford: Berg, 2002), at 5 and throughout the book.
features and renewable sources of building material, fuel, and food for animals. The common use of *leah* (“wood clearing”) and other Old English terms related to wooded areas within place-names—*wald, wudu, graf, holt, sceaga, hyrst, hangra, fyrhð, and feld*, for example—attests to the frequency with which the Anglo-Saxons settled in close proximity to woodland. According to a search of the Old English Corpus, neither *holtes on ende* (“the forest’s edge”) nor variants on the phrase occur elsewhere in the extant literature, so the poet is not merely selecting a stock poetic phrase to satisfy the alliterative or metrical requirements of the b-verse. Rather, the location specifically reminds the Anglo-Saxon reader of his own place of abode. The ability of the medieval poet and reader to identify with the cross is in part a function of the cross sharing a physical origin with the Anglo-Saxon reader.

From a literal standpoint, the Anglo-Saxons and their settlements are connected symbiotically to forests and trees because of physical necessity, and it is almost impossible to overstate the economic importance of trees and wooded areas in medieval England. Bede, for instance, tops his list of Britain’s natural resources with grain and timber. Of course, timber is used for construction and for fuel, but wood is also essential for leechdoms (medical remedies), dyes, glass, lye soap and charcoal production, lead and iron smelting, and the production of leather. Additionally, acorns and beechmast found in wooded areas are essential for the

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15 Compare, for example, David Hill’s map of forest cover with his map of place names from Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* [An Atlas of Anglo-Saxon England (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 16, 30].


fattening of pigs. Such economic importance is confirmed through Anglo-Saxon laws. Ine (688-726), the first West Saxon king known to establish a written law code, sets the base value for each tree at 30 shillings but assesses larger trees at a higher rate. If a tree can shelter 30 swine, the penalty for illegally felling it is doubled. Alfred (871-899) likewise codifies the value of trees, noting that a fallen tree that results in an individual’s death should be offered in compensation to the victim’s relatives rather than the property owner. Bede’s history and the Anglo-Saxon law codes reveal that trees are essential to a community’s existence, and the success of an individual family often is tied to its access to, or possession of, trees.

Another identification with the cross’s origin in the Dream can also be traced to the fact that wooded areas and trees, dominant features in Anglo-Saxon England’s landscape, record themselves geographically on the medieval consciousness. Although maps that attempt to reproduce the topography of the period disagree on the extent of forest areas, even the most conservative estimate of woodland distribution shows major forest coverage extending from the southern kingdoms of the West Saxons north through Hwicce, Mercia, and Anglia. Some of the largest forest areas of the period are the Ciltern, separating East Anglia from the East Saxons, Bruneswald, dividing East Anglia and Mercia, and the Andredesweald, separating Kent, Surrey, and the South Saxons. The Andredesweald, which covered most of southeast England, is described as “a vast expanse of oak wood” that “encroached upon three kingdoms.”

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21 Ibid., 71.

expect forests to act as a division between man and nature, but archeological evidence
demonstrates otherwise. New information has changed conventional impressions of the Anglo-
Saxon forest. The idea of an “impassable, damp oak forest” has been revised to “a canopy forest
through which passage was possible and in which foraging animals provided a useful resource
for man.”23 Moreover, historical writings suggest that wooded areas in the Anglo-Saxon period
are perceived as natural boundaries that divide kingdoms, slowing the diffusion of language and
culture, and so serving as physical reminders of the separation between the independent states of
Anglo-Saxon England rather than an inhospitable or hostile barrier between man and nature.24

Combined with their economic importance, the geographical tendency of trees to separate
the often feuding Anglo-Saxon kingdoms leads to an association of wooded areas with refuge, an
idea which hints that the removal of the tree from the forest’s edge in the *Dream* is an
encroachment on protected ground at the periphery of the settlement. As natural boundaries,
forests are seen as an asylum for those who know the English countryside best, as they impede
the advance of occupying armies and provide a refuge for native inhabitants warring against
invading armies.25 King Alfred himself escapes the Vikings by retreating with a small band of
thanes to woods in 878, a difficult year for the West Saxons but one that culminates in a peace
treaty and the conversion of the Viking king Guthrun to Christianity.26 Another mention of
woods in connection to the idea of refuge occurs at the end of the Anglo-Saxon period. In 1072,
brothers Earl Edwin and Earl Morcar travel through woods in a rebellion against William the

23 Hill, 17.
24 According to Peter Hunter Blair, the Weald’s separation of Sussex from nearby kingdoms is a large factor in the
tardiness of Sussex in converting to Christianity [*Anglo-Saxon England: An Introduction* (1959; reprint, New York:
Barnes and Noble, 1996), 248-49]. For individual trees as property boundary markers, see Hooke, 21-23.
25 See, for example, *Chronicle*, 5, 14; Bede, 48; and Hooke, 142.
26 *Chronicle*, 74-76; *Alfred the Great: Asser’s Life of King Alfred and other contemporary sources*, ed. and trans.
Conqueror, continuing an uprising that soon fails. Wooded areas thus offer at least temporary sanctuary through early English history from the Romans, Saxons, and Vikings, even through to the coming of the Normans.

Although conventional wisdom presents the forest as a dangerous place in the Anglo-Saxon mind, the Old English poetic corpus, like the historical record, for the most part presents wooded areas as protected, even hallowed ground. The late tenth-century *Guthlac A*, a poem which centers on the saint’s defense of his sacred hill that is hidden within a wood, is almost certainly a later invention than the *Dream*, but its incarnation in the Exeter Book shares a similar manuscript audience and a setting that favors groves as sacred areas that should not be exploited. For the ascetically-minded monastic reader, nature in *Guthlac A* provides a place of solitude where the individual can perfect his life through discipline and asceticism. The space where Guthlac makes his home thus is concealed and protected from men until God reveals a hill in the midst of a wooded area. The choice of location for Guthlac’s hermitage replicates one common Anglo-Saxon settlement pattern, a raised clearing in the midst of the wood offering both a natural defense against enemies as well as the natural resources necessary for survival. The saint chooses to erect a dwelling on that spot, not out of human greed, but because it is a holy place protected by God from the demons who have some interest in the space as well:

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. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Wæs seo londes stow
bimiþen fore monnum,    oþþæt meotud onwrah
beorg on bearwe,    þa se bytla cwom
se þær haligne    ham arærde,
nales þy he giembde    þurh gitsunga
lænes lifwelan,    ac þæt lond gode
fægre gefreopode,    síþan feond oferwon
Cristes cempa.
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(146-53)

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27 *Chronicle*, 206.
[The spot of land was
hidden from men, until the Creator revealed
the hill in the wood, when that builder came
who raised a holy home there,
not at all through greed,
because he cared for loaned riches, but for God
he protected that land well, after he, Christ’s champion,
overcame the devil.]

As forests protect the Britons from the Romans and Anglo-Saxons, and later the Anglo-Saxons from the Vikings, the grove in Guthlac A shelters the hermit in his stand against devils as they attempt to rob him of his sacred ground. After he has defeated his enemies, he enjoys communion with the wild creatures in his dwelling place in the bearu (“grove”). The grove essentially becomes a temporary Paradise on earth while Guthlac awaits the afterlife, reflecting the individual’s desire for a comfortable dwelling place as well as a position in heaven. The poem conceives of this solitary place within the grove as a place of power, triumph, and earthly refuge. Similarly, the tree in the Dream, although forcibly removed from a related physical site, becomes the iconographic representation of such a natural space and its associations.

The connection of wooded areas with sanctuary, nourishment, and noble protection for the most vulnerable members of society makes the defenselessness of the tree at the forest’s edge in the Dream all the more disconcerting. The grove in Guthlac A positions a self-imposed exile—who voluntarily has forsaken the shelter of family and friends—in a place of sanctuary and power. The exposed situation of the female narrator in The Wife’s Lament, another poem of the Exeter Book, parallels even more closely the vulnerability of the tree in the Dream. The speaker, who has lost her lord, friends, and a once-beloved comrade, is told to live “on wuda bearwe, / under actreo, in þam eorðscræfe” (“in a wood grove under an oak tree in a cave-
dwelling,” 27-28). In this case, the dwelling offers the speaker little comfort. She is oflongad (“filled with longing,” 29), wraþe begeat (“grievously preoccupied,” 32), full of modceare (“sorrow,” literally “mood-care,” 40, 51) and longapes be mec on þissum life begeat (“longing which infused me in this life,” 41). Yet through the death of her friends and the narrator’s keen awareness of personal hardship, the oak tree provides her protection. The fortification offered by the oak, along with the narrator’s mourning, suggests Old Testament associations of this species with sanctuary and the grave. Additionally, the physical protection provided by the oak tree within the wood grove points to contemporary links connecting this “high, towering” tree with kingship, with nourishment and sustenance (flæsces fodor, literally “flesh’s feeder”), and with trustworthy protection (æþele treowe, “good faith”). The wooded herheard (“sanctuary-yard”) is the narrator’s one remaining support (15-17). In both Guthlac A and Wife’s Lament, wood groves offer the protagonists shelter and protection from harm. In the Dream, however, the woodland is unable to protect the tree from removal in the same way the tree itself is powerless to prevent Christ’s death.

This, of course, is because Christ’s sacrifice is voluntary in the Dream; that is, it is permitted by God. As in Guthlac A, in which the wooded grove becomes a sanctuary protected by God for the Christian disciple, the Dream emphasizes God’s ownership, even overlordship, of the earth and all creation. Implicitly, the tree and the holt (“forest” or “thicket”) in which it is found is His. Three times, for example, the tree is referred to as either belonging to or connected

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28 Jane Chance asserts that the speaker’s dwelling is envisaged as a “mock ring-hall” in Woman as Hero in Old English Poetry (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 92.


31 For the idea of overlordship, see Bede, 111, and the Chronicle, 60 (827 A.D.), which uses the term bretwalda or brytenwalda (“wide ruler”).
to God: wulrdres treo ("tree of glory," 14), wealdendes treo ("the ruler’s tree," 17), and haelendes treo ("healer’s tree," 25). The decoration of the earth with gems signifies God’s royalty and his ownership of the land. The phrase, “gimmæ stodon / fægere æt foldan sceatum” ("fair jewels stood at the corners of the earth," 7-8), suggests the cosmological cross, which “includes the concept of Christ on the Cross embracing the whole world and taking it home to the Father.”

The earth’s response to Christ’s steps signifies its subordination: it trembles when Christ approaches the cross for his voluntary sacrifice, and the cross recounts, “ic bifian geseah / eorðan sceatas” ("I saw the surfaces of the earth shake," 36-37). Likewise, all of creation weeps at Christ’s crucifixion: “Weop eal gesceaft, / cwiðdon Cyninges fyll. Crist wæs on rode” ("All creatures wept, bewailed the king’s fall; Christ was on the cross," 55-56). Pronouncing Christ’s lordship over all of mankind, the epithet Frean mancynnes ("ruler of mankind," 33) declares his authority over the killers who remove the tree from the forest, construct the cross as a gallows for criminals, and eventually situate the apparatus on the mountain for his crucifixion. The poem thus emphasizes that not only the earth and all creatures in it belong to God, but evil men also are under his lordship. So, God is the owner of the tree and the property on which it lies, and the men who fell the tree are committing an offense against God.

The connection between the protected wooded area and God the High King in the Dream is strengthened by the medieval association of wooded areas with political, geographical, and economic power, particularly as held by the church or the state. The initial construction of the first recorded Christian church in England from timber marks the beginning of timber’s physical and economic importance for the church in England, and by the ninth century, woodlands have become essential to the maintenance of its operations. Charters of the period illustrate the

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32 McEntire, 349. See also Swanton, 50-51.

33 Chronicle, 25 (626 A.D.).
church’s influence over timber and pasturing rights. In an 825 Mercian lawsuit brought by the reeves over swineherds, for example, the reeves want the wood-pasture extended beyond the rights, including pannage for 300 swine, established during Æthelbald’s time. However, Archbishop Wulfred along with his wiota (“advisers”) upholds the previous entitlement of the bishop and his community to two-thirds of the wood and mast. Although the reeves do not protest the ruling, this lawsuit makes clear the prerogative of the church over not only religious matters but over secular interests as well. The value of these woodland rights in satisfying the church’s need for material resources is exemplified by a ninth-century Peterborough agreement. In 852, Peterborough monks lease Wulfred land at Sempringham on the condition that every year Wulfred would give to the monastery 60 wagon-loads of wood, twelve wagon-loads of brushwood, and six wagon-loads of faggots (bundled branches for firewood), along with other offerings. Woodland rights for the church, increasing as kings convert to Christianity and become more religious, reflect growing ecclesiastical power and the association of woodland with both the state and the church through the Anglo-Saxon period.

Not only does the Anglo-Saxon context suggest that in the removal of the cross from the forest’s edge, protected ground belonging to God (the High King or overlord) is infringed, legal writings of the period support that the removal of the tree from the forest’s edge in the Dream is unlawful. Ine and Alfred both establish laws preventing the illegal burning or felling of trees on another individual’s property. Although for Ine the outright destruction or vandalism of trees

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35 Robertson, 12-13; also noted in Chronicle, 65.
36 Offering woodland rights through woodland grants or tax exemptions back to the church is a way for Anglo-Saxon rulers to express their devotion to God. See, for example, Edward the Confessor’s grants of woodland rights to the monks of Westminster Abbey [Anglo-Saxon Writs, ed. F. E. Harmer (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1952), 344-45, cited from Cotton Charter vii.6, and 358, cited from Westminster Abbey Muniments xvii].
through fire, “a thief,” is a more serious crime, the illegal felling of a tree also requires recompense. The axe, he writes, is an “informer” because of the noise it makes and the length of time required to fell a tree. In contrast to Ine, Alfred focuses on the outcome of the crime, the owner’s loss of property, and he sets an equal penalty for burned and felled trees. These laws, along with the location of the *hælendes treo* (“the Savior’s tree”) at the perimeter of the forest in the *Dream*, connect the enemies of the cross to questionable if not criminal activity.

In view of the legal context and the poem’s assertion that the entire earth—including the forest’s edge—belongs to God, the men who fell the tree to form Christ’s death instrument blatantly disregard legal precedent and property rights. A late Middle English poem by Richard Rolle called *The Pricke of Conscience* (c. 1349) associates the forest with thieves and outlaws. The analogy compares the world to a forest and devils of hell to thieves who violently rob everything from those who pass:

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The world alswa may lykend be
   Til a forest, in a wild cuntre,
   That es ful of thefs and outlawes,
   That, commonly, til forestes drawes,
   That hald pases, and robbes and reves
   Men of that thai have, and noght tham leves;
   Swa es the world here thar we duelle,
   Ful of thefs, that er devels of helle;
   That ay us waytes, and er bysy
   To robbe us of our gudes gastly.39
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Written at least three centuries later than the Vercelli manuscript, the Rolle passage nonetheless is noticeably similar to *Guthlac A*, which conceives of the hero’s enemies as spiritual forces of

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37 Ine decrees that an individual who burns down another man’s tree will pay 60 shillings and only half as much for felling a tree with a limit of 90 shillings for three trees no matter how many more trees he cuts down (*Laws*, Attenborough, 51).

38 Ibid., 71. Alfred sets a fine of 30 shillings, 5 shillings for *ælc great treow* (“each big tree”), and 5 pence for each of the rest.

evil that would rob him of his wooded home, and the relevant lines in the *Dream*, which align the enemies of the tree against both the cross and Christ. The enemies in the *Dream* are drawn to the forest. The forest appears to be located in a wild country because there is no consequence for the action of taking the tree. Exploiting the tree as an instrument of death, they take what is not theirs which ultimately leaves God without his son.

The overt disregard for property rights in the *Dream* not only characterizes the men who chop down the tree at the forest’s edge as evildoers but also intensifies the reader’s sense of identification with the cross, polarizing the reader with the tree against its enemies. The soldiers seize the tree, create a barbaric display for death, and carry the hewn object to a mountain where they hoist it in a distortion of its former self:

> Genaman me þær strange feondas, geworhton him þær to wæfersyne, heton me heora wergas hebban. Bærôn me ðær beornas on eaxlum, oððæt hie me on beorg asetton, gefæstnodon me þær feondas genoge. (30-33)

[Strong enemies lay hold of me there, then wrought a spectacle for themselves and commanded me to raise their criminals. Warriors carried me on their shoulders until they set me up on the mountain. Many enemies fastened me there.]

The cross refers to the men who cut it down and fashion it into a gallows for criminals as *strange feondas* (“strong or powerful enemies”). Those setting up the cross for the crucifixion are characterized as *beornas* (“warriors”) and *feondas genoge* (“many enemies”). Such imagery portrays the tree, and later Christ, as innocent and outnumbered participants in a momentous battle. The intense conflict of the scene and the violence of the language is noted by Swanton, who reads the tree as a “symbol of the beauty in creation perverted by the vile in men for their own ends.” Of course the word *feond*, in addition to meaning “enemy,” is also used in Old

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40 *Dream*, 69.
English texts as the term for “devil,” or “the Devil,” so the poet situates the tree from the outset in a cosmic struggle of good against evil, portraying the forest’s edge much like the grove in *Guthlac A*.41

The Anglo-Saxon reader’s personal identification with the cross in the *Dream* is rooted in his or her arboriculture. Writings of the period and archeological analyses of woodland in medieval England indicate that an Anglo-Saxon reader of the Vercelli manuscript is most likely intimately acquainted with the forest, or at least the edge of it. He views the forest as an entity that separates kingdoms from each other or one that provides cover for warriors or wrongdoers. He classifies each tree as a unique entity distinguishable from the other trees around it, whether for its geographic position or physical function. He associates tree ownership with wealth, rank, and power, particularly as the power of the church and the state increases. The forest’s edge therefore marks the character of the Anglo-Saxon personal and national identity, a character that is marked not only by its affinity for trees but also by tensions between feuding societies, between man and his environment, between Christianity and paganism. Additionally, for Anglo-Saxon Christians, the audience of the Vercelli manuscript, the forest’s edge—and by association, the tree as the iconographic cross—signifies the difficulty of living in a fallen world while preparing for the hereafter. The unique situation of the cross transforms the narrative from a biblical story of a remote time and location to a relevant account evoking a sense of urgency in the medieval reader.

Man’s Relationship to Nature: a Desire for Harmony

The poet’s decision to capitalize on the cultural context of trees encourages the Christian reader’s identification with the rood-tree, particularly with its geographical origin and defenseless position on earth before it is honored by God for its service. Moreover, the poem read in its literary and historical context highlights a desire for harmony between society and the environment that is violated by the cross’s enemies. The misuse of nature aligns the Anglo-Saxon Christian reader with the environment, and thus, the tree, against the cross’s enemies, preparing the reader to transform himself in response to the cross’s metamorphosis.

The carelessness demonstrated by the cross’s enemies in the Dream contrasts with Anglo-Saxon texts that demonstrate a respect for the proper gathering and use of trees. An often-cited example of the care with which the Anglo-Saxons approached the selection and use of trees is found in Alfred’s preface to his translation of Augustine’s Soliloquies, in which St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) discusses the immortality of the soul, the individual’s quest for knowledge and understanding, and the importance of learning. In the Preface, Alfred opens with a building metaphor comparing his selection of books for his translation program to an individual’s careful selection of trees for appropriate use. He carefully and selectively gathers materials from the most beautiful woods, wishing that he could bring the whole forest. He advises his readers to fetch more supplies from the same forest so he can build a home and then enjoy the fruits of his labor. The goal of the construction is to create greater ease both in a transitory home and an eternal home, to labor first so later one can later enjoy rest, provision, and future inheritance. In Alfred’s prayer at the end of the Preface, he asks that God allow him to be fit for both earth and heaven, to be useful here on earth and to inherit the kingdom of Heaven. Alfred’s Preface, with

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its premise that men and trees should be useful, becomes an apt metaphor for the Anglo-Saxon view of the environment.

Such a utilitarian view of nature does not necessarily translate to an exploitative relationship with the natural world, an idea that is highlighted in the Dream poet’s displeasure with the treatment of the tree. The removal of the tree, on the contrary, challenges cultural mores. R. D. Berryman considers the Anglo-Saxon civilization a “green society” because of the careful management of woodlands and woodland resources in the late Anglo-Saxon period.\textsuperscript{43} He opens his discussion of late Anglo-Saxon woodland management and use with Alfred’s Preface, which explains the careful way in which wood is selected and gathered, transported, and utilized:

\begin{quote}
. . . þæt he menige to þam ílcan wuda þar ic ðas stuðansceaffas ceart, fettige hym þar ma, and gefeðrige hys wænas mid fegrum gerdum, þat he mage windan manigne smicerne wah, and manig ænlic hus settan, and fegerne tun timbrian.\textsuperscript{44}
\end{quote}

For the Anglo-Saxons, the process of woodland management is two-fold. First, it involves gathering woodland materials in the proper way, whether through felling or coppicing, which is the practice of cutting down trees and tree stems and allowing them to regenerate on a rotational basis. Second, Anglo-Saxon woodland management utilizes these materials to the maximum benefit and for an appropriate use. “Winding” or “weaving” (\textit{windan}) walls, for example, employs wattle for efficient construction. Wattle, or latticework, is created through a process similar to basket-making in everything except the finished product, which in this case is used as

\textsuperscript{43} Berryman, 238.

\textsuperscript{44} \textit{St. Augustine’s Soliloquies}, 47.
“in-fill” in buildings framed with timber.45 The use of coppicing and wattle in Anglo-Saxon England demonstrates the value and respect placed on the proper and complete utilization of trees. This utilitarian view of nature, with humans responsible for careful management of the environment, also reflects Alfred’s personal desire to manage his own time carefully to reap future reward and to be useful to God.

Illustrated through Alfred’s Preface, the Anglo-Saxons’ careful management of woodland resources contrasts with the careless felling of the tree in the Dream. The cross’s enemies select the tree for Christ’s crucifixion primarily out of convenience, because it stands at the edge of the wood and is the proper size. Based on Anglo-Saxon tree culture, they casually exploit nature for evil purpose. The feondas in the Dream are interested only in expediency, and they casually select the tree for its placement rather than its qualities that uniquely suit it to its purpose and function.

That the Dream poet would lament such lack of harmony between man and his environment is reinforced by other Old English poems, particularly the Exeter riddles that center on the conflicted relationship between humans and wooden objects fashioned for human use. This dissonance has not gone unnoticed, as Kevin Crossley-Holland observes in his analysis of the Exeter riddles: “The Anglo-Saxons were very conscious of the power and beauty of trees, and of their use and abuse by men.”46 Riddle 53, providing a natural point of origin for its subject, depicts a tree particularly evocative to that of the Dream. The poet pits man against nature by portraying the tree sympathetically and characterizing the man who utilizes it as a

45 For a discussion of how this process uses young growth to increase production and ease of harvesting, see Berryman, 10.
battering ram as an enemy.\textsuperscript{47} In this case, the narrating object, a battering ram, describes its life as a tree in the wood. The object of destruction describes its former life as a tree with \textit{tanum torhtne} ("splendid branches," 2) that is \textit{on wynne} ("in a state of joy or gladness"). Its life parallels the human life cycle:

\begin{verbatim}
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . Wæter hine ond eorþe
    feddan fægre,  öþþæt he frod dagum
    on òðrum wearð  aglachade
    deope gedolgod,  dumb in bendum,
    wriþen ofer wunda,  wonnum hyrstum
    foran gefrætwed.
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{3-8}

[Water and earth kindly fed it,
until in other days it became old,
in a state of misery,
deeply wounded, silent in its bonds,
fettered over its wound,
in front armored with dark accoutrements.]

The diction—\textit{aglachade} ("state of misery"), \textit{deope gedolgod} ("deeply wounded"), \textit{dumb in bendum} ("silent in its bonds")—personifies the tree. The battering ram’s violent actions reflect its owner’s brutality: "he fæcnum weg / þurh his heafdes mægen hildegieste / òðrum rymeð" ("through the might of his head, he clears way for the other, the treacherous enemy," 8-10);

"strudon / hord ætgædre" ("they plundered the treasure hoard," 10-11). Grudgingly forming a partnership with its owner, a \textit{hildegieste} ("war-guest," 9), the wooden object is aligned with its owner through martial metaphors.\textsuperscript{48} Nature is allied with nobility and freedom—the tree initially is characterized as magnificent, soaring, and joyful (1-3)—while man is coupled with the brutal abuse and domination of nature. Like the cross in the \textit{Dream}, there is no skill implied in its

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{47} Michael D. Cherniss uses this riddle to argue that the cross in the \textit{Dream} is portrayed as Christ’s weapon in “The Cross as Christ’s Weapon: the Influence of Heroic Literary Tradition on \textit{The Dream of the Rood},” \textit{ASE} 2 (1973): 247.

\textsuperscript{48} See Foley, 27, for discussion of battle imagery and the tree’s negative transformation.
\end{footnotes}
fashioning as an object for man’s use. The poet, far from glorifying battle, expresses dismay at the capacity of a man to disfigure a lovely tree into an object of destruction.

This same sense of regret for the misappropriation of trees, less explicit in the Dream, is emphasized in Riddle 23 (bow) in which the warring object is fashioned for man’s use with deadly results. The discharged shaft, according to the bow, is ætren (“poisonous,” 4) and feorhbealo (“a deadly evil,” 5). The bow’s owner þæt wite gescop (“shaped this torture,” 6) while the bow staunchly serves its purpose: “ic spæte, spilde geblonden, / ealfelo attor” (“I spit the dire poison, bent on annihilation,” 8-9). Despite this apparent complicity, the poet reminds us that the bow is subject to its master, who must cleverly bind the weapon in order to coerce it to shoot appropriately (15-16). Like the rood-tree in the Dream, the objects of Riddles 23, 53 (battering ram), and 73 (lance), readings of which appear later in this chapter, voice a reluctance to serve man’s evil purpose.

That the cross’s enemies in the Dream overstep a fine line between appropriate and effective utilization and the brutal exploitation of trees is brought to light through the elaboration of the gathering of timber and its skillful use found in Riddle 21 (plow). The wooden plow describes its manner of use in the first seven lines: it is “wisað har holtes feond” (“guided by the forest’s grey enemy,” 2-3). The language indicates a respect for the skill of the plowman. He wisað (“guides,” 2), weged me ond þyð (“supports and pushes me,” 5), and sawed on sweð min (“sows on my track,” 6). The poet emphasizes the gathering rather than the destruction of the tree. The plow is bunden craeft (“skillfully bound,” 7) as an individual transforms it from a tree into an instrument for human use:

49 Crossley-Holland identifies the “grey foe” either as the plowman or as the axe that felled the tree (93). Baum interprets it as either a plowman or a plowshare (29).
[I go forth, nose forward,
Brought from the grove, bound with craft,
Carried on a wagon, I have many wounds.]

Here the poet uses a series of past participles that takes the emphasis off the har feond ("grey enemy"). In contrast to other works in which the felling of a tree is a personal, even brutal affront, the poet maintains an objective tone in his description of the transformation of tree to plow—in this case the wood is simply brungen ("brought"). By means of the passive voice construction, the poet de-emphasizes any human role in the tree’s felling and focuses instead on its adaptation to another form. Consequently, the description of fashioning the wood into an object for man’s use is positive. The poet, however, does not imagine such an amicable relationship is always the case. The last lines of the riddle add a condition for the proper use of the plow: it will “toþum tere, gif me teala þenaþ / hindeweardre, þæt biþ hlaford min” (“tear with my teeth, if my lord, who is behind me, serves me properly,” 14-15). Even the plow must be used properly to benefit its owner.

The respect for trees used properly and distaste for their misuse, seen here and in the other Exeter riddles, drives the Dream poet’s sympathy for the rood-tree and antagonism toward its enemies. The Dream spends only three lines on the men who cut down the tree, fashion the cross, and set it up in preparation for Christ’s crucifixion. These enemies of the tree are not artisans or craftsmen, and in their careless disregard for the tree, they become guilty of the misuse of nature. In contrast to Alfred’s Preface that carefully elaborates the competence with which the craftsman chooses material, loads it into his wagons, and constructs a dwelling, this wood is chopped down abruptly and seized. The description of fashioning the wood into an
object for man’s use is bare and even demonstrates distaste. The Dream poet focuses on the display created by the fashioning of the tree into a cross rather than how the cross is fashioned: “geworhton him þær to wæfersyne” (“they formed a spectacle for themselves,” 31). The poet transforms the tree from a standing, living entity to a humiliating show for its enemies, an “unnatural, shameful spectacle.”50 The tree is felled for evil purpose, and there is no skill implied in its fashioning as an object for man’s use.

Like the Exeter riddles that associate living trees with goodness and integrity, the Dream demonstrates that using a tree to turn nature against a human is an especially heinous crime, for not only does it turn God’s creation against himself, but it violates the innate goodness of that creation.51 Old English texts, including Alfred’s Preface, demonstrate that the prudent use of trees is considered appropriate and acceptable. But here, the enemies of the cross desecrate the natural order. Their actions contrast with Anglo-Saxon texts that value the proper use of trees and parallel those that show disgust for their misuse or intentional destruction.

Sympathy for the Work of Trees: The Cross’s Purpose

The arboriculture of trees in Anglo-Saxon England, including a deep, but often thwarted longing for harmony between man and nature, leads to the reader’s personal identification with the tree and polarization against the cross’s (and therefore Christ’s) enemies. Moreover, the poet’s sympathy for trees and respect for the agency of trees extends to the cross/tree of the Dream. Surprising in contrast to the post-Conquest portrayal of trees, the poet sees no great divide between nature and culture, for trees in his perception are living, positive, and active.

50 Swanton, 69.
entities. This particularly Anglo-Saxon concept deepens the ability of medieval Christians to actively extend the experience of the cross in the Dream to their own situations.

After the Norman Conquest, the monarch’s power over wooded areas becomes almost absolute, and this domination is one of the causes of a widening gulf between man and nature, which is less and less likely to have the perception of being animate. But before Cnut (1016-1035), the first king of England to institute forest laws, and for the most part until the English monastic reform, discussed briefly in the next chapter, English texts recognize and honor trees as active and living forces. Such an appreciation for nature contrasts with much of “western culture” that “has treated the human/nature relation as a dualism.”52 This constructed division between humanity and the rest of the natural world results in an exploitative relationship that portrays man as active, agent, living, and rational, in contrast to nature, which is perceived as passive and inactive.

Although a growing opposition of man and nature may be found, for example, in the gradual erosion of forests through the medieval period,53 such an extreme dualism is not a significant aspect of the Anglo-Saxon culture. A society that is necessarily close to nature is apt to observe, recognize, and acknowledge the agency possessed by non-human life. Trees, while possessing an agency different from humans, still through their creative abilities are active entities, demonstrating “the four requirements for agency—plan, intention (or . . . purposiveness), evidence, [and] skill.”54 For example, a tree has a plan embedded in its DNA, its intention is demonstrated through this plan that determines “particular forms of being and becoming,” the evidence of its plan and “purposive action” is found in its very existence, and it

54 Jones and Cloke, 60. See also 215 for further discussion of the creative agency of trees.
displays skill by “exploiting a wide and contingent variety of circumstances.” The Anglo-Saxons, of course, know nothing of the genetic plan found in plant DNA or the complex skill demonstrated in a plant’s biological processes, but their poetry recognizes the agency of trees. Not only do poets acknowledge non-human agency, but they perceive this agency as positive.

This point is illustrated by the favorable picture of the tree as an active force in nature and society found in Exeter Riddle 30. The riddle refers variously to a tree, ship, log, cup, and cross to describe a beam. As a tree, it plays with the wind; as a log, it is busy with fire; as a cup, it is the recipient of affection; as a ship, it is eager to travel; and as a cross, it raises itself up and generates happiness in those who revere it. Speaking in the first person, the beam alternates between describing itself in its natural state and manmade form before moving to its symbolic incarnation as Christ’s cross:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Ic eom legbysig,} & \quad \text{lace mid winde,} \\
\text{bewunden mid wuldræ,} & \quad \text{wedre gesomnad,} \\
\text{fus þorðweges,} & \quad \text{þyre gebysgad,} \\
\text{bæru blowende,} & \quad \text{byrnende gled.} \\
\text{Ful oft mec gesiþas} & \quad \text{sendað æfter hondum,} \\
\text{þæt mec weras ond wif} & \quad \text{wlonce cyssað.} \\
\text{Þonne ic mec onhæbbe,} & \quad \text{ond hi onhnigæþ to me} \\
\text{monige mid miltse,} & \quad \text{þær ic monnum sceal} \\
\text{ycan upcyme} & \quad \text{eadignesse.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

[I am busy with fire, play with the wind, entwined with glory, joined with the weather, eager to journey, busied by fire, a blooming grove, burning ember. Very often comrades send me along hands, so that men and women stately kiss me. Then I raise myself up, and many bow down to me with favor, where I arise, men shall increase their happiness.]

\[55\text{Ibid., 61 and 62, respectively.}\]
\[56\text{Crossley-Holland, 98. For the solution to this riddle, see also Baum, 18, and Cherniss, 248.}\]
In the same manner as the *Dream*, the poet of Riddle 30 shows how the beam is an active force in its natural state, how it serves in its manmade constructions, in this case as a ship and cup, and how as a cross it transforms to a stately figure with powers of blessing. Like the wooden objects of the Exeter riddles, the beam is an object used by humans. As a cross, however, it becomes the dominant force in the relationship. It actively raises itself, and men and women respond by kissing it and bowing to it. It adds to human happiness, and it is venerated by society. A similar rhetoric is in effect for the cross in the *Dream*.

Although critics have long pointed out the passivity of the cross in the *Dream*, the tree engages in both human-like agency and the creative, transformative agency associated with plant life. It is true that the cross, already established as a character through its first person narration, is passive through the actions of the *strange feondas* (“strong enemies”), but this evidence does not preclude the productive activity that follows Christ’s crucifixion. By emphasizing the passivity of the tree during its removal from the forest’s edge, the poet aligns the tree with Christ, and by extension, with humanity. Rosemary Woolf’s argument, which is still accepted today by many critics, is that the passive, suffering cross represents the human side of Christ, whereas the dynamic, heroic warrior that climbs on the cross depicts the divinity of Christ. This passivity reflects the new Christian heroic model, as seen in such works as Ælfric’s *Life of St. Edmund*, which the homilist offers as an example of dedication to Christ in the midst of great persecution. In the *Life*, which establishes a heroic code of nonviolence for the Christian, Edmund chooses to lay down his weapons rather than fight the pagan Vikings or share his power

57 For the cross as an Anglo-Saxon retainer, see Cherniss, especially at 251.
and treasure. For Ælfric, Edmund’s greatest action of bravery is in throwing down his weapons and following Christ. In response to violence or insult, the heroic Christian, who knows that his reward is in the hereafter, endures and calls on Christ rather than worrying about his life or even defending it. St. Edmund’s heroic passivity is similar to the tree’s reaction—or lack of reaction—to its enemies. The defenselessness of the personified tree adds to the sense of sympathy for the cross and is a source of identification for the Anglo-Saxon Christian who has transferred his source of power from personal strength to reliance on God.

And yet, despite its apparent passivity, the tree possesses an active agency that reflects the self-perception of the Anglo-Saxon poet (and Christian reader). Edward Irving posits that the cross’s “tense and deliberate willing of such inaction,” as it participates in Christ’s voluntary sacrifice, constitutes an action of sorts.60 But the tree’s activity goes beyond willful inaction. Even the pattern of the cross’s narrative, moving from “subject-initial word order” to “verb-initial,”61 calls attention to the cross’s performance. Many of the verbs that open each verse describe “brutal actions carried out on [Rood], ironically reminding us of the many actions this hero is not carrying out himself.”62 But the tree is given agency by the poet. It speaks through prosopopoeia, narrating the story of Christ and commanding the dreamer to share in turn the vision with other men (95). The tree interprets the story of Christ’s crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. It prophesies future judgment and presents itself, in its symbolic form as a cross, as the way to heaven. Its message transforms its hearer.63

60 Irving, 106.
62 Irving, 106.
63 For a discussion of the dreamer’s transformation, see, for example, Fleming: 47.
The *Dream* poet demonstrates an awareness and appreciation of the transformative agency achieved by the rood-tree.⁶⁴ Such positive activity is typical of trees in the Old English corpus. In the Exeter riddles, however, this transformative capacity becomes subordinated to humans once a tree is felled. Riddle 73 (lance) supports this assertion. The origin of the lance, like the battering ram of 53, is traced to a tree, this time a tree that is allowed to live its lifespan in a field until it becomes old.⁶⁵

[... me grome wurdon, of þære gecynde þe ic ær cwic beheold, onwendan mine wisan, wegedon mec of earde, gedydon þæt ic sceolde wiþ gesceape minum on bonan willan bugan hwilum.]

(3-7)

[Cruel enemies changed me from what I was before—from my former nature, alive. They reversed my condition, moved me from my native place, forced me to bow down sometimes, against my nature, to the will of killers.]

The text contrasts human agency, which here is seen as negative, with the tree’s potential agency as a living object. The enemies change the tree, reverse its condition, move it out of its natural environment, and force it to submit to killers.

The cross of the *Dream*, in contrast, retains several of its tree characteristics even after its felling, specifically the agency found in its healing powers, its ability to restore order to the troubled life of the dreamer, and its power of blessing. Its powers of physical healing, implied by its own transformation, are reinforced by reminding the Anglo-Saxon reader that the cross is also a tree. References to the cross as a tree throughout the *Dream* connect its healing powers to Anglo-Saxon medicinal remedies, which harness the power of trees in a variety of forms such as

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⁶⁴ See Jones and Cloke, 57, for examples of the “transformative action” of trees.

⁶⁵ Crossley-Holland, 113, notes this poem’s connection to Riddle 53.
salves, lotions, fomentations, and emetics, used to treat everything from simple headaches and upset stomachs to heart disease and cancer. Such remedies associate trees with the action of healing, a “transformative agency” that here is “harnessed by planned human agency.” Indeed, healing proves to be one of the primary activities of the tree in the *Dream*, flourishing once again as the cross that, like Christ, has been transformed by God:

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.. On me Bearn Godes
þrowode hwile. Forþan ic þrymfæst nu
hlifige under heofenum, ond ic hælan mæg
æghwylcne anra  þara þe him bið egesa to me.
```

(83-86)

[On me the son of God
suffered for a while. Because of that I rise high,
glorious and secure under the heavens, and I may heal
everyone who is in awe of me.]

Like a healthy, living tree, the cross in its new form now towers securely and splendidly. The poet thus emphasizes not only the healing powers of the tree but its restoration to an even more prominent place as the cross of the resurrected Christ.

The Anglo-Saxon audience’s appreciation for physical healing as one of the important works of trees can be extended to the cross’s role in the Christian’s life. In its transformed state, the cross leads not only to physical or even spiritual healing but also to blessing and salvation for humanity. Ironically, the object that in real life cannot speak or clear a path here “opens up the right path of life for speech-bearers” (“ic him lifes weg / rihtne gerymde, reordberendum,” 88-89). Again, Anglo-Saxon culture illuminates the cross’s abilities. A popular way of blessing the fields, for instance, involved the use of a piece of each type of tree that grows on the land.68

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66 See Berryman, 32-33.
67 Jones and Cloke, 57.
Spiritual blessing likewise comes through the cross. As a healer and guide, the cross blesses the seeker as an iconographic representation of God’s grace and forgiveness, forgiveness that extends not only to the sinful dreamer (and the Anglo-Saxon reader) and to the tree itself, which has unwillingly been the medium of Christ’s death, but also to the men who personally constructed the cross and crucified Christ. For example, the act of cutting down the tree is a crime against God, yet the poet ignores any type of penalty or retribution for these criminals and instead focuses on the reward given the tree for its service. So, the cross testifies:

Hwæt, me þa geweorðode wuldres Ealdor
ofer holmwudu, heofonrices Weard,
swylce swa he his modor eac, Marian sylfe,
ælmihlig God, for ealle menn
geweorðode ofer eall wifa cynn.

(90-94)

[Well, then the Lord of glory honored me
above the trees of the forest, the guardian of the kingdom of heaven,
just as he, almighty God, honored his mother also,
the Virgin Mary herself, honored for all men above all of womankind.]

Despite God’s dominion over heaven and earth, the emphasis is on his restoration of the cross to a position of power rather than his retribution against the men who felled the tree or killed his son—which is the point of redemption, after all.

Although the enemies of the cross interfere with a natural state of belonging by felling the tree used to crucify Christ, the Dream poet also finds a resolution to the longing for harmony with nature and a restoration of the natural order in the entity of the tree. These themes are consistent with the Old English poetic corpus. In such poems as Resignation and Maxims I in the Exeter Book and Maxims II in the Cotton Tiberius B i manuscript of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, routine, creative processes exhibit a longing for harmony with nature and a restoration of the

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69 See Irving, 111, for a discussion of the cross as an enlightened healer and guide.
natural order in the body of the tree. The routine action of trees is in growth, the development of branches, the growth and loss of leaves, and an eventual, natural death. According to the Anglo-Saxon poets, humans should emulate this type of creative agency that relies on “routinized involvement in the fabric of existence.” The tree in Maxims I, a didactic wisdom poem, therefore becomes a model of wisdom, appropriate and proper mourning, and the natural cycle of life. The placement of the tree in the passage immediately after the statement that men and women bring children into the world (24-25) suggests a connection to the human individual. After noting that trees suffer the loss of their leaves (25-26), the poet connects the tree’s life cycle to the necessity of human death in balancing birth and regulating the population (31-34). Given the possibility of misfortune and the certainty of death, man’s solution is in modeling the living, standing tree:

Licgende beam læsest groweð.
Treo sceolon brædan ond treow weaxan,
sio geond bilwitra breost ariseð.

(158-60)

[Fallen timber least grows.
Tree should broaden and faith increase,
yonder it springs from the breast of the innocent.]

The initial statement, that a felled timber grows least, acts as an obvious fact, but it also indicates the care with which a tree must be felled. Once felled, the timber no longer can grow or gain in its yield, but while living, it is natural for trees to develop. Living trees therefore are more valuable than those that are felled. The Maxims I poet compares the flourishing of faith to the flourishing of trees. The heart of the innocent is analogous to a place where trees thrive—a place where trees are not felled but are left alone to act out their natural processes. In the same way, faith springs naturally out of the innocent heart. The process needs no interference.

70 Jones and Cloke, 55.
The tree in this manner becomes a vehicle for teaching about the natural order of things, the value of accepting things as they are, and the importance of wisdom as a path to a meaningful life. *Maxims II*, which “offers general precepts about the divinely ordained laws of the natural world and of the human hierarchy,” also associates trees with faith and wisdom.⁷¹ Opening with the king’s responsibility to rule over his kingdom, the poem posits a series of truisms related to such topics as cities, the seasons, and the ephemeral nature of truth and grief. The poet then enumerates a series of associations: in a warrior belongs courage, the javelin belongs in the hand, the sword belongs in the lap, and so on. In the middle of this list, the poet turns to the tree, which, he asserts, should be in the ground, growing. The double meaning of *treow*, used first to mean “faith” but followed almost immediately by the synonym *wudu* (“wood”) connecting it to its more common definition, directly links the wise, truthful, and faithful man with the tree:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Treow sceal on eorle,} \\
\text{wisdom on were. Wudu sceal on foldan} \\
\text{blædum blowan.}^{72}
\end{align*}
\]

[Faith should be in a nobleman, wisdom in a man. A tree should be in the ground blooming with leaves.]

Like the tree, man’s most significant action is in creation—in this case, the production of truth and wisdom. Similarly, the *Dream* poet asks his reader to model human activity after the rood-tree, generating truth and wisdom through the message of Christianity.

Like the *Dream*, the closing lines of the Exeter Book’s *Resignation*, an elegiac prayer for endurance during exile, offer a tree as a model of effective agency for the anguished speaker of

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the poem. The tree, which flourishes and spreads branches while awaiting its destiny, becomes a metaphor for prelapsarian man.

\[
\text{Wudu mot him weaxan, wyrde bidan, tanum lædan; ic for tæle ne mæg ænigne moncynnes mode gelufian eorl on eþle.} \\
\text{(105-108)}
\]

[A tree may grow, wait for destiny, produce twigs; for disgrace, I may not love in my heart any one of mankind, any nobleman in my native land.]

The poet juxtaposes the flourishing tree with the speaker, whose development is stagnated for tæle (“for blame,” “reproach,” or “calumny”). The tree’s agency is equated with its ordinary process of growth, whereas human development is seen as the individual’s ability to love. Because of the narrator’s situation, whether read literally as exile from his community or figuratively as a metaphor for his alienation from God, he is not able to thrive. Dryhten min, / meahtig mundbora (“my lord, mighty protector,” 108-109) is the speaker’s only bot (“relief, atonement,” 110). The tree becomes an example of how the speaker, and humans in general, should face their destiny:

\[
\text{Giet biþ þæt selast, þonne mon him sylf ne mæg wyrd onwendan, þæt he þonne wel þolige.} \\
\text{(117-18)}
\]

[Yet that is the best, when man himself may not turn aside his destiny, that he then endure well.]

The tree faces its wyrd (“destiny”) by biding its time—the verb used in line 105, bidan, means “to wait,” “delay,” and “endure,” but bidan also has the more active connotations of “living,” “continuing,” and “experiencing.” Because the tree “bides,” it is also able to grow and produce. 
The poem’s conclusion implies that if all individuals do the same, or *wel polige* (“endure or suffer well”), they can enjoy an agency similar to the tree.

In the same manner, the tree in the *Dream* endures suffering ultimately to flourish as a healer of both physical and spiritual ailments. Elaine Treharne, who links the poem with the theme of rebirth, observes several transformations within the poem that operate for the poet, the cross, the dreamer, and Christ as well as for the Christian reader. Despair, sorrow, and death are changed to hope, joy, and life.73 The dreamer, who on first viewing the cross becomes sorely conscious of his sin, sorrowful, afraid, and troubled, is transformed by the cross’s narrative. Meditating on the tree alters his physical circumstance, as it is his *mundbyrd* (“protection,” 130) in the absence of powerful earthly friends. The dreamer becomes glad and joyful in spirit, hopeful and expectant for the future, and aware of Christ’s friendship. The tree becomes the perfect vehicle to effect such an emotional and physical transformation, as its agency is harnessed by God’s power and the Dreamer’s *misio*. By emulating the tree, a model of regeneration, rebirth, growth, and wisdom, the medieval reader can access the uniquely powerful energy of trees to enact his own metamorphosis.

**Conclusion**

The poet’s decision to situate the cross as a tree at the forest’s edge creates a point of contact for a medieval English audience that relies on wooded areas for survival. The tree’s forced removal from a site associated with sanctuary not only adds to the feeling of empathy for the cross, but it also reminds readers that they are vulnerable to their own enemies and therefore are in need of God’s protection. Moreover, identifying the cross as a tree calls the reader’s

attention to the misappropriation of nature on the part of the tree’s foes. This aligns the Christian reader with nature against the larger society, as represented by the powers responsible for crucifying Christ. Identifying with the tree reminds the Christian that temporary suffering for the sake of Christ certainly results in greater strength, blessing, and radical transformation. Finally, Anglo-Saxon arboriculture reveals an admiration for trees as active, transformative agents. The tree in the Dream thus becomes an example of acceptance, perseverance, and wisdom as the reader works out his life’s meaning and purpose, and it models the way in which he should endure life’s problems in order to eventually thrive.

Overall, the portrayal of trees in Anglo-Saxon poetry and prose suggests sympathy for nature and the works of nature, and reading the Dream in connection with the Old English corpus from a historical and ecocritical perspective sheds light on an early medieval intimacy with nature that embraces the cross/tree in the poem. This close relationship with nature wanes later as trees increasingly become associated with the power of the state and church and after the tenth-century monastic reform, when monastic writers distance themselves from the veneration, even the deification, of landscape features, preferring instead to use objects in nature as vehicles for religious analogy and allegory. Consequently, their use of trees becomes more stylized: during this time, English patterns of thinking about hermeneutic problems (such as the Fall of Man, redemption, and penitence) become more organized and academic. But in the early Anglo-Saxon period, the forest’s edge holds a fascination, and, consequently, the Dream poet honors the edge of the forest as the compelling site of the cross’s inception.
CHAPTER 3

THE DEADLY TREE OF PARADISE: THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

IN THE JUNIUS 11 MANUSCRIPT

The representation of the Holy Cross as a tree is arguably the most significant botanical image in Anglo-Saxon literature, shaped by the cultural perception of trees as valuable, living entities worthy of personal identification and veneration. The previous chapter illustrated how the *Dream of the Rood* poet, by merging the cross and all its religious associations with the sympathetic and compelling qualities possessed by trees, takes one of Christianity’s focal symbols and transforms it into a powerful, sentient being that in turn, transforms its viewer. What happens, though, when medieval authors turn to another biblical tree, one which does not complement the positive nuances inherent in their own arboriculture? In the rest of the corpus, trees in their natural state are primarily viewed as living objects that share certain admirable human qualities like strength, resilience, and perseverance, as vital resources for human use and management, or as positive forces to venerate. Notwithstanding this tendency toward sympathy for trees and the work of trees, Anglo-Saxon authors are faced with some difficulty when depicting the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Is the tree allegorical or literal? Is it itself evil? How should a tree that results in the Fall of Man be portrayed?

The trouble Anglo-Saxon authors have in answering these questions about the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is never so clear as in the late tenth or early eleventh-century

1 All quotations from MS Junius 11 are from George Philip Krapp’s edition, *The Junius Manuscript*, vol. 1 of ASPR (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931), and are cited parenthetically by line number. All translations from Old English throughout the chapter are my own unless otherwise noted.
Junius 11 manuscript. The Junius manuscript compiles three different perspectives on the biblical tree in the form of the eighth-century poem *Genesis A*, *Genesis B*, a ninth-century translation and interpolation of an old Saxon poem, and fifty-four late tenth-century illustrations primarily featuring prominent stories from the book of Genesis. An examination of the texts and illustrations comprising the manuscript demonstrates that the meaning of the Tree of Knowledge is itself contested. The *A* author is most concerned with theological accuracy, whereas the *Genesis B* author turns to allegory in order to portray the biblical tree as itself evil and to contrast it sharply with the Tree of Life. The illustrator, in contrast, portrays the Tree of Knowledge as an innocuous, shape-shifting gendered entity that reflects the deceptive nature of temptation and is powerless until its fruit is consumed. He also uses the trees to suggest that the Fall is related to sexual transgression, and unlike the *Genesis B* poet who treats Eve sympathetically, the illustrator suggests that Eve bears the primary responsibility for Adam’s disobedience.

This chapter examines the depictions of the biblical tree in *Genesis A*, *Genesis B*, and the illustrations to consider the way in which the composite depiction, akin to that experienced by the manuscript’s early eleventh-century audience, distances the Tree of Knowledge from the transformational and creative agency of trees hitherto found in Anglo-Saxon arboriculture while

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2 Scholars generally date the manuscript at c. 950-1000. See, for example, Krapp, x, and Catherine E. Karkov, *Text and Picture in Anglo-Saxon England: Narrative Strategies in the Junius 11 Manuscript*, CSASE, no. 31 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 2.


at the same time moving toward allegory. Although the meaning of the Tree of Knowledge is disputed within the manuscript, its portrayal demonstrates a closer affinity to patristic and contemporary theological teaching than one might expect, thus exposing an implicitly didactic purpose for the account. Finally, the composite reveals a trajectory of thinking about trees in medieval English texts from the personification of the cross in the *Dream of the Rood* toward the excessive allegorization of trees in the later Middle Ages.

The representation of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil from text to image within the same manuscript creates some confusion about the theological implications of the biblical account. Through depictions of the Tree of Knowledge, text and image simultaneously, and contradictorily, depict man’s disobedience as wrong but justified, original sin as avoidable but natural, and God as both perfectly righteous but the creator of evil. The composite portrayal represents a paradigmatic shift from the representation of trees as living, physical entities (as seen in the early *Genesis A*) toward their depiction as allegorical vehicles for religious teaching. As allegorical devices, they for the most part lack positive physical vitality (represented primarily through *Genesis B* and the late tenth-century illustrations).

Prepared during the turbulent Danish invasions around the beginning of the first millennium, the Junius 11 manuscript could be seen as offering comfort to the righteous through its message of triumph for Christian readers. Junius 11 contains four vernacular Old English religious poems based on biblical narratives—in addition to *Genesis A* and *B*, the manuscript includes *Exodus* and *Daniel*, all of which were completed by one scribe, and *Christ and Satan*, the work of three scribes. \(^5\) Collectively, the poems emphasize the individual’s obligation to praise God for his mercy and redemption of his flawed but chosen people through key events

\(^5\) Karkov, 27.
from scripture: the fall of the angels and of man, the rise and fall of the Israelites, and the
triumph of Christ over hell and Satan.⁶

Although scholars do not agree on its purpose, it is clear that the manuscript was
compiled carefully for the religious benefit of readers.⁷ The manuscript itself was highly
esteemed according to Barbara Raw, who argues that the manuscript, the rebinding of which was
completed in the early thirteenth century, was valued most for its pictures and probably was
displayed on a lectern, a chain mark suggesting it was chained in a church or cloister.⁸ It is easy
to imagine monks reading aloud to each other for religious entertainment or devotional purpose
and carefully examining the elaborate illustrations, or perhaps reading to the secular clergy (or
illiterate but devout lay members) from the text, using the manuscript within the church for
liturgical readings or lectionary material. Despite the manuscript’s probable religious use, the
Old Testament poems are much more than literal biblical paraphrase and often add an Anglo-
Saxon flair to its stories, facts no doubt that led T. A. Shippey to conclude that the eminent
homilist Ælfric (c. 950-c. 1010) probably would not have approved. Regardless of what Ælfric
might have thought, the moments of originality in the manuscript are in fact what make it most
valuable to the study of trees in medieval literature.

⁶ For readings that consider the poems as a cohesive collection, see for example, R. M. Liuzza, The Poems of MS
Junius 11: Basic Readings, ed. Liuzza (New York: Routledge, 2002), especially at ix; Peter J. Lucas, “Loyalty and
especially at 121 and 132-33. For an explanation of the importance of intertextuality, function, and overall content
of the Junius manuscript, see Karkov, 6. Karkov argues that throughout the manuscript, the illustrations are paired
intentionally with the text (11).

⁷ For manuscript purpose, see for example, J. R. Hall, who concludes that Junius 11 comprises a non-liturgical
salvation history focused on the theme of redemption but provides an overview of the primary arguments supporting
a liturgical use for the manuscript in “The Old English Epic of Redemption’: Twenty-Five-Year Retrospective,”
Poems of MS Junius 11, ed. Liuzza, 53-68; T. H. Shippey, Old English Verse (London: Hutchinson University
Library, 1972), especially at 137; and Charles W. Kennedy, “The Cædmonian Poems,” in The Earliest English
Poetry: A Critical Survey of the Poetry Written before the Norman Conquest with Illustrative Translations (London:
Oxford University Press, 1943), 197.

The biblical and hermeneutic questions raised by the scriptural tree, along with the answers presented by the exegetes, demonstrates how fully the Junius manuscript remakes the Tree of Knowledge as an allegorical tree pointing to sexual temptation and the deceptiveness of nature. As the most influential patristic voice in medieval English theological thought, Augustine in particular provides a useful context for medieval understandings of the subject and an important prerequisite to Ælfric’s interpretation of the Tree. In the ninth century, for example, Alfred includes Augustine’s *Soliloquies* in his “books most necessary” translation program, and in the late tenth century Ælfric cites Augustine as his primary source in the Latin preface to his first series of Catholic homilies. References by Ælfric, whose homilies are contemporary with the manuscript, reveal how the biblical tree is shaped for an audience of the late tenth and early eleventh century and help to explain how the depictions in the Junius manuscript differ from not only the biblical account, patristic sources, and Anglo-Saxon arboriculture, but also from Ælfric’s contemporary homiletic treatments. A comparison of these sources shows the divergence in common understandings of the biblical tree. One strain of thought views the Tree of Knowledge as merely a literal test of human obedience, another identifies the tree itself as evil in order to portray the Fall of Man more sympathetically, and a third allegorizes the tree to demonstrate the danger of sexual temptation and the deceptiveness of nature.

The Shaping of the Biblical Tree

First mentioned in the older *Genesis A* when God commands Adam and Eve not to eat of the tree, the Tree of Knowledge is developed extensively in the *Genesis B* interpolation that ends with Adam and Eve’s remorse, and it reappears briefly in the continued *Genesis A* account when

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9 For Ælfric’s reliance on Augustine, see CHIII, xxxviii-lxii, especially at xxxviii.
God questions Adam and Eve about their disobedience. The textual narrative is interspersed with nine illustrations that are directly related to the biblical tree: God beholds Adam and Eve in Paradise, Adam and Eve in Paradise, The Serpent in the Garden, the Winged Messenger Tempts Eve, Eve Succumbs, the Fall of Adam, the Couple’s Remorse, Awareness of Nakedness, and Adam and Eve Cover their Nakedness (plates I-VII).

The composite Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Junius manuscript shares little resemblance to its biblical presentation, where it is unique primarily for its placement near the Tree of Life in the middle of Paradise and for God’s express command not to eat from it. In the scriptural narrative, God plants a “paradise of pleasure” (Gen. 2:8-9) containing all types of beautiful trees with delectable fruits, including the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the middle of the garden. The Tree of Knowledge has no distinctive physical characteristics; rather, God’s prohibition marks it apart for special attention. God tells Adam that he may eat of any tree in Paradise except for the Tree of Knowledge, “For in what day soever thou shalt eat of it, thou shalt die the death” (Gen. 2:16-17). It is Eve, though, whom the serpent manipulates to eat the fruit. In response to its devious question why God commanded the couple not to eat of every tree of Paradise, the woman protests that they are permitted to eat the fruit of all the trees except for the one in the middle of the garden. Although in the biblical text God directs the prohibition to Adam before the creation of woman, it is clear that Eve is aware of the command because she recites the more severe prohibition against even touching the tree to the serpent (Gen. 3:3). In response, the serpent misrepresents the truth but does not lie, claiming that rather than dying, her eyes will be opened and she and Adam will be “as gods, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:5, 6). Only after the serpent draws attention to the Tree of Knowledge does the

10 References to the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil are found in Genesis 2:8-9, 16-17, with Genesis 3 narrating the Fall of Man. All biblical quotations throughout this chapter are from the Douay-Rheims version.
woman seem to notice it. Seeing that the tree is “good to eat, and fair to the eyes, and delightful to behold,” she takes the fruit of the tree, eats it, and gives it to Adam who eats it without protest (Gen. 3:6). In fact, Adam and Eve do not die immediately when they eat the fruit, and they do become like gods in the sense that they become aware of both good and evil. Verse 7 notes that their eyes are opened and they gain awareness of their nakedness, so they “sewed together fig leaves, and made themselves aprons,” and they hide from God “amidst the trees of paradise” when they hear God walking in the garden (Gen. 3:8). This Tree of Knowledge shares only a superficial similarity to that found in the Junius manuscript, particularly in the \textit{Genesis B} interpolation where its most extensive development takes place.

The \textit{Genesis B} poet expands on details left bare in the biblical text and occasionally even alters scriptural details in order to deflect blame for the Fall from man to the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The skeletal particulars related to the trees of paradise remain the same. The Tree of Life still stands near the forbidden Tree of Knowledge. God commands man to enjoy any tree in the garden except for the forbidden tree. A serpent tempts Eve (although the poet greatly expands the role of the serpent). Eve gives the fruit to Adam. They realize they are naked, cover themselves with leaves, and hide from God in the garden. Adam blames Eve, Eve blames the serpent, and God punishes all three. Yet for all his faithfulness to the basic scriptural account, the \textit{Genesis B} poet makes radical changes that recreate the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil as an allegorical object used to explain the origin of evil. Didactically, the alterations sharpen the contrast between good and evil and underline the severity of Adam and Eve’s decision to disobey God. The author of the Old Saxon source for \textit{Genesis B} surely is more poet than theologian, as the alterations, while adding to the literary appeal of the poem, also create theological tensions foreseen by the early exegetes and Christian commentators.
For example, Augustine (354-430) uses the Tree of Knowledge to consider the problem of evil in a world created by God, and his concern that the biblical tree might be considered evil, or even an allegorical representation of evil, animates the Junius account. In his *De Genesi ad litteram* (*The Literal Meaning of Genesis*), which contains lengthy discussions of the two paradisal trees, Augustine emphasizes that the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, a literal tree with some allegorical significance, functions as a test of Adam’s virtue and is not itself evil.11 Addressing the tendency of some of his contemporaries to allegorize scripture and ignore its literal implications and thereby anticipating the theological dilemma of the Junius authors, Augustine stresses the material reality of the paradisal trees while acknowledging that they also contain figurative meaning. As the biblical account suggests, the Tree of Life in Augustinian thought differs from the Tree of Knowledge in that its fruit actually possesses miraculous power:

[I]t was of such a sort that the man’s body would be fortified by it with enduring health, not as with other food, but by some hidden infusion of vigorous well-being . . . the means of ensuring that his body would not change for the worse through ill-health or old age, or even succumb to some accident . . .12

Whereas the Tree of Life clearly has the power to confer immortality, the knowledge of evil appears connected to the disobedience of God’s perfect will rather than to any power associated with the consumption of fruit in the biblical account. Consequently, the Tree of Knowledge, while also “a visible and bodily tree like all the others,” has no particular power embedded in its fruit.13

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12 Ibid., 353-54.

13 Ibid., 354.
Augustine’s concern that the Tree of Knowledge might be seen as the source of evil in the world is corroborated by the *Genesis B* representation. Augustine emphasizes that the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge is not evil or poisonous because God created only good things. Had the tree’s fruit been toxic, then God’s command not to touch it would have been irrelevant. In other words, the fruit would be dangerous regardless of the command. To clarify, by commanding Adam not to touch an object that holds no natural negative consequences, God can “demonstrate that obedience in itself is a good thing and disobedience is in itself an evil.” The tree receives its name, then, not because it is innately evil, but as a warning and reminder for Adam to obey God. It follows that the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil for Augustine is a literal tree that produces good fruit. This teaching is consistent with the biblical account but is directly contradicted by *Genesis B*.

Unlike the *Genesis B* author, who allegorizes both the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, Augustine is hesitant to assign the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil a specific allegorical meaning. The tree is literal, it is good, it is a test of Adam’s merit, but only in his first commentary on Genesis, *De Genesis contra Manichaeos* (*On Genesis: A Refutation of the Manichees*), which is written ten years earlier, does Augustine give an allegorical interpretation of the Tree of Knowledge, or rather, of its fruit. He writes that the forbidden fruit from Eve signifies “the deceitful doctrine, that is, of the heretics with its great promise of knowledge, and the disclosure of some marvelous secrets or other, as a kind of

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15 *On Genesis*, 363.

16 Ibid., 354.
seasoning to make the error more attractive—and effective.”17 If the fruit is deceitful doctrine, is the tree then deceit, or error? Augustine never makes this connection in the *Refutation*. Moreover, in his later commentary, Augustine distances himself from any allegorical interpretation, in part because of the contemporaneous polemic surrounding allegorical versus literal readings of the scripture, but also perhaps because any figurative association suggests that God created not only the literal tree—which is inherently blameless—but also the ill associated with the tree.

Extending Augustine’s interpretation of the biblical Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, Ælfric (c. 950-c. 1010) associates the Tree more closely with sexual transgression and thus moves closer to the depiction in the contemporary Junius account, particularly that found in the illustrations. “On the Beginning of Creation,” a sermon from his first series of vernacular homilies that is roughly contemporary to the Junius manuscript and actually quite similar in scope, focuses on the Creation and Fall and then rapidly moves through key Old Testament points and the story of Christ.18 Through his depiction of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, Ælfric emphasizes first, the importance of obeying God even in ways that might seem insignificant to man, and second, the importance of good works. His depiction of the biblical tree in his “basic introduction to Christian history”19 focuses on encouraging men to put aside unrighteousness and to merit eternal life with God through their actions.20 Put simply, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil for Ælfric emphasizes the importance of obeying God and

17 Ibid., 100.
18 Old English citations for this sermon are cited by item and line number from CHI. Abbreviations have been expanded and capitalization and punctuation regularized.
19 CHIII 7.
20 “Men ða leofestan, smeagað þysne cwyde, and mid micelre gyme þe þe þe wiccað unrihtwisnesse, and geearniað mid godum weorcum þæt eec lif mid gode se ðe ðe æ on ecnysse rixað” (CHI 1.294-96). [Men most beloved, reflect on this homily, and with great care refrain from unrighteousnessand earn with good works eternal life with God, who reigns for ever and ever.]
demonstrating one’s spiritual merit. Following Augustine in viewing the tree as a literal object designed to test man’s obedience, Ælfric anticipates his audience’s questions as he asks why God would forbid such a small thing to Adam.\(^{21}\) He answers, like Augustine, that Adam needed a command to demonstrate God’s position of authority and Adam’s position of servitude. By foregoing the fruit of one tree, Adam could merit the joys of heaven.

Lest his audience excuse Adam and Eve or blame God and his creation, though, Ælfric stresses Adam and Eve’s unrighteousness. First, by conflating the two versions of God’s command seen in Genesis, he dispels any misgiving that Adam and Eve may have misunderstood the prohibition. In Ælfric’s version, God directly commands man not to eat or touch the tree. Second, by focusing on how simple and small God’s request is—his order is a little thing (\textit{swa lytles þinges}) and requires only easy obedience (\textit{eaðelican gehyrsumyss})\(^{22}\)—he stresses man’s capacity to fulfill the command. Third, he insists, like Augustine, on man’s culpability in the Fall, although Augustine demonstrates more sympathy for Adam and less for Eve than does Ælfric.\(^{23}\) Using the forbidden tree to explain free will, the English theologian emphasizes the voluntary nature of man’s disobedience. Finally, he plays down the role of temptation in the Fall by omitting the biblical reference to Eve looking at the tree and seeing that it is good, thereby suppressing all mention of the tree’s physical attraction for Eve. In keeping with his express focus, he disregards the Tree of Life in his account, which would deflect attention from man’s unrighteousness and disobedience. Including two trees would distract the medieval reader from Adam and Eve’s disobedience, as does the \textit{Genesis B} account, where the poet juxtaposes the two trees and even aligns one with good and one with evil.

\(^{21}\) “Hwi wolde god swa lytles þinges him forwyrnan, þe him swa micle oðre þincg betæhte?” (CHI 1.74-75). [Why would God deny him so little a thing, when he had entrusted to him other things so great?]

\(^{22}\) CHI 1.74 and 80, respectively.

\(^{23}\) \textit{On Genesis}, 451, 463.
Because Ælfric seems to understand that his lay audience could misinterpret almost any description of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, he uses a skeletal description to avoid imbuing it with either positive or negative agency.\textsuperscript{24} His model, Augustine, seeing the possibility that some would interpret the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil as first, evil, and as a result, God as the creator of evil, goes so far as to affirm the tree’s innate goodness. And, the positive force of early Anglo-Saxon connotation would seem to accord with this conclusion. But Ælfric also sees the potential for misinterpretation in either negative agency, as it contains in the Genesis $B$ interpolation of the Junius manuscript, or the positive connotation of early Anglo-Saxon texts and Augustine’s interpretation. If the tree is evil, then God created evil. If the tree is good, then Adam and Eve understandably are drawn to eat from it. So, Ælfric carefully steps around either of the possible conclusions to which his readers might arrive and instead gives the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil no more description than that found in the biblical account.

Whereas Ælfric is careful, like his model Augustine, to avoid an allegorical treatment of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, one reference to propagation in connection with the tree suggests that he may want his audience to associate the tree more closely with sexual transgression. Readers familiar with Ælfric’s work will not be surprised at this slight emphasis. Catherine Cubitt points out, “Sexual restraint was not the only form of obedience to God but it had very significant and special resonance for Ælfric.”\textsuperscript{25} Thus, while Ælfric carefully follows the Genesis account in his “On the Beginning of Creation,” he at least hints that Adam’s transgression may have had something to do with a lack of sexual restraint. Explaining the

\textsuperscript{24} For Ælfric’s primary audience and purpose of the homilies, see CHIII xxvi and xxii, and Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe, “Three English Writers on Genesis: Some Observations on Ælfric’s Theological Legacy,” \textit{Ball State University Forum} 19 (1978): 69-78.

allegorical meaning of the skins with which God clothes Adam and Eve as the new mortality of man, Ælfric claims:

Ne þorfte Adam ne eal mancynn þe him siððan of acom næfre deaðes onbyrian, gif þæt treow moste standan ungehrepod, and his nan man ne onbyrigde; ac sceolde Adam and his ofspring tyman on asettum tyman, swa swa nu doð clæne nytenant, and siððan ealle buton deaðe faran to ðan ecan life.26

[Neither Adam nor all mankind that since have come from him needed ever to have tasted of death, if that tree might have stood untouched, and if no man had tasted from it; but Adam and his offspring would have propagated at set times, just as now the clean animals do, and after they would have gone without death to eternal life.]

Had Adam and Eve not eaten of the tree, they would have lived eternally without death. Ælfric emphasizes that the major way in which life on earth would have been different for Adam and his descendants is that sexual intercourse would have occurred solely for the purpose of procreation.

At first glance, Ælfric appears to follow Augustine in his interpretation of Adam and Eve’s prelapsarian sexuality—intercourse without lust occurred for the purpose of procreation. In fact, Augustine insists that God created male and female for the express purpose of procreation, although he also argues at length that in Paradise sexual intercourse would have occurred without lust.27 Because he believes other exegetes misinterpret the role of sexual intercourse in Eden, Augustine is careful not to overstate the connection between carnality and the Tree of Knowledge. In his view, carnality is not the cause of the Fall but merely a physical consequence of disobeying God. He repudiates those who believe sexual intercourse between Adam and Eve is the basis for the Fall and the allegorical meaning of the Tree of Knowledge.28

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26 CHI 1.150-54.
27 On Genesis, 378-81, 384-86, 463.
reference to these “ridiculous” beliefs demonstrates that the association of the Tree with sexual carnality long predates Ælfric and the Junius manuscript.

While Augustine does connect the Fall of Man to the result of concupiscence, Ælfric streamlines the connection, implying in his juxtaposition of ideas that the touching and eating of the Tree of Knowledge brought sexual uncleanness, which led to man’s mortality.\(^{29}\) Even if Ælfric does not believe that sexual misconduct is the cause of the Fall, it does seem clear that in his mind, the most important outcome of eating and touching the Tree of Knowledge, in addition to the scriptural end result of death, is that humans no longer propagate as the clean animals do. The stress Ælfric gives to sexual cleanness within marriage is found throughout the homilist’s writings, which contain “an ideology of literal and figurative virginity which lies at the core of his notions of a holy society and his hope for national unity.”\(^{30}\) According to Robert Upchurch, literal _clænnyss_ (“purity” or “chastity”) within marriage for Ælfric involves not only “monogamy or avoiding adultery” but also “the abstention from intercourse,” while figurative _clænnyss_ signifies “steadfast faith” and “steadfast belief.”\(^{31}\) Given Ælfric’s connection of chastity to spiritual purity in his writings, he may have been thinking here of these more figurative implications. But he does not pause at this point to expand on these ideas. For his audience of simple, _ungelærede menn_ (“unlearned” or “ignorant men”),\(^{32}\) it is enough to _imply_ that concupiscence is a cause rather than a result of man’s mortality. While Ælfric will not deviate from scriptural accuracy to allegorize the Tree of Knowledge as sexual carnality as Augustine’s

\(^{29}\) See also Catherine Cubitt, 4.


\(^{31}\) Ibid., 253 and 255, respectively.

\(^{32}\) CHI Praefatio 51-52.
contemporaries had done six centuries before, he certainly restructures his interpretation to at least suggest the cause of the Fall is related to sexual transgression.

The writings of Augustine and Ælfric foreground the religious context for the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in MS Junius 11. The biblical tree raised important theological questions for medieval Christians. Early Christians had debated whether the Tree of Knowledge was literal or allegorical, if it was evil or good, and why God had tested man through the tree. For the reform-minded Ælfric, who is exceptionally astute about the needs of his audience, and who, therefore, can be trusted as a reliable source of information about the monastic culture that produced Junius MS 11, the central questions surrounding the tree can be seen as directly applicable to his audience. First, is obedience, even on small matters, necessary, and why? Second, is human nature really all that bad? Ælfric’s answers to these questions provide almost a direct response to what he surely would have seen as a heretical treatment of the Tree of Knowledge in the Junius manuscript. In his view, God’s “little” prohibitions, seen for instance in church doctrines prohibiting sexual activity even within marriage at certain times, are very simple and fair tests by which man can voluntarily merit eternal life with God and avoid eternal damnation.

Genesis B

Unlike Augustine, who affirms the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil as innately good, Ælfric, who avoids either positive or negative associations with the tree itself while subtly connecting its fruit with sexual transgression, and Anglo-Saxon arboriculture, which generally affirms the goodness of trees, Genesis B in the Junius manuscript depicts the tree and its fruit as
evil. Such a representation implicates both God and the human couple for the Fall. The first hint at the tree’s capacity for evil agency occurs at the beginning of the Genesis B interpolation. At this point in the manuscript, God tells Adam and Eve to use and enjoy all the trees (“niotað inc þæs oðres ealles,” 235), to leave alone the Tree of Knowledge (“forlætað þone ænne beam,” 235), and to protect or defend themselves against the fruit (“wariað inc wið þone wæstm,” 236). The fruit has become a natural weapon of sorts, and God puts Adam and Eve on their guard against nature, his own creation. In the rest of the narrative, the Genesis B author eliminates any doubt that the Tree of Knowledge itself is wicked by starkly contrasting the characteristics of the two biblical trees.

Indeed, the Tree of Knowledge in the Genesis B depiction is not only the knowledge of evil—as in the biblical or Augustinian accounts, but it itself is evil. It is deaðes beam (“tree of death”), its physical appearance as well as its allegorical description according to its new nominative. The eallenga sweart, / dim and þystre (“utterly black, gloomy, and dark,” 477-78) Tree of Death differs unmistakably from the beautiful and graceful Tree of Life, lifes beam (468). The poet carefully contrasts the two trees, juxtaposing the obscure and dark Tree of Death se bær bitres fela (“which bore much bitterness,” 479) with the wynlic, wlitig and scene, / liðe and lofsum (“pleasant, beautiful, and brilliant, lithe and praiseworthy,” 467-68) Tree of Life. The latter confers the consumer with immortality, pleasure, God’s favor, and “witode geþingþo /

33 For a brief discussion of the Saxon poet’s contradiction of Genesis 3:5 and Augustine’s assertion that God created nothing evil, see Shippey, 151-152.
34 Eric Jager discusses the military theme in Genesis B in “A Miles Diaboli in the Old English Genesis B,” ELN 27 (1990): 1-5.
35 The term deaðes beam is repeated in lines 478, 492, 528, 593, 638, and 646.
36 For the possible connection of the Tree of Life / Tree of Death dichotomy to Alcuin, see Shippey, 153. For the contrast between the two trees as associated with Eve and Mary, see Jane Chance, Woman as Hero in Old English Literature (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 69. For the medieval tendency to classify, organize, and arrange ideas, see C. S. Lewis, The Discarded Image (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 10.
on þone hean heofon, þonne he heonon wende” (“certain rank in that high heaven when he goes
from here,” 475-76). The stark contrast between the two trees makes Adam and Eve’s
disobedience all the more inexcusable.

Even the fruit of the Tree of Death is characterized as evil. The narrator identifies the
fruit as weorcsumne wæstm (“harmful fruit,” 594) and appel unsælga (“unfortunate or
pernicious apple,” 637), directly to blame for an array of horrifying consequences. The text
stresses that this fruit is responsible for death, human slavery to the devil, hell, exile, and the Fall
of Man:

hit wæs þeah deaðes swefn     and deofles gespon,  
helle and hinnsið     and hæleða forlor  
menniscra morð,   þæt hie to mete dædon,  
ofet unfæle . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .(720-23)  
[However, it was death’s sleep and the devil’s shackle,  
hell and departure and the destruction of man,  
the murder of humanity, that they took for food,  
unholy fruit.]

The stacking of negatives on top of the subject pronoun “it” adds emphasis to the final
nominative, the subject of the sentence, fruit. The fruit, for the Genesis B poet, takes a share of
the blame for man’s fall.

If the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge is unholy, the Genesis B poet has run directly into
the theological problem associated with characterizing the Tree of Knowledge as evil, as
Augustine warns. If the fruit itself is evil, God, as its creator, must share in the responsibility for
man’s Fall. Yet the poet does not shy from this implication. Whereas the biblical account merely
notes that God planted a garden, creating all kinds of attractive and nutritive trees among which
are the two paradisal trees, the Genesis B poet connects God more directly and intimately with
the Tree of Death. The poem emphasizes that the creator planted these two trees with his own hands for the purpose of allowing each individual to choose between good and evil:

And him bi twegin beamas stodon
þa wæron utan ofætes gehlædene,
gewered mid wæstme, swa hie waldend god,
heah heofoncyning handum gesette,
þæt þær yldo bearn moste on ceosan
godes and yfeles, gumena æghwilc,
welan and wawan.

(460-66)

[And by them stood two trees which were on the outside laden with fruit, covered with produce, just as Lord God the high heaven-king planted them with his hands, so that there children of men, each man, might choose between good and evil, well-being and woe.]

The trees linger near Adam and Eve (rather than the reverse). Personified by their position as the subjects of the sentence, they are the actors of the initial clause rather than the human couple. So the poet sets up a triangulation between the two trees and the human couple, positioning the two trees near the pair, but then he confuses the neatness of the couple’s choice between good and evil by intimately situating God at the trees’ point of origin. Since God personally plants both trees, he is revealed as the father of not only Adam and Eve, but also the progenitor of the Tree of Death.37

The Genesis B poet’s nod to patristic writings that explain why God would establish such a test for his subjects by creating the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil does little to exonerate God for his role in the creation of deãdes beam. In keeping with the Junius manuscript’s emphasis on the necessity of praising God, Adam and Eve respond with gratitude to God’s command at the beginning of the Genesis B interpolation: “sædon ealles þanc, / lista

and þara lara” (“they said thanks for all, for his skills and those precepts,” 238-39). The poet interjects that the couple has no precedent for understanding sorrow:

[They were ignorant of sorrows
to mourn, but that they should forever follow
God’s will. They were beloved to God
as long as they would keep his holy word.]

Although the interjection faintly suggests that God’s command is a way for Adam and Eve to accomplish God’s will and merit his favor, this postscript to the couple’s prayer of gratitude implies that the couple is naïve about the severe consequences associated with breaking God’s command. Therefore, at the same time the poet hints at a reasonable explanation for the creation of this Tree of Death, he undercuts it by referring back to Adam and Eve’s ignorance.

The *Genesis B* poet’s emphasis on Adam and Eve’s awareness of God’s prohibition, if not the impact of breaking it, implies that he has foreseen how his readers might react to the thought of God planting such an evil and harmful tree as he portrays. Thus, he alters the account to stress that the couple is not ignorant of the potential consequences of eating the fruit. First, God gives the command directly to Eve as well as Adam, whereas the scriptural account only communicates God’s command to Adam before the creation of woman.38 This alteration assures the reader that Eve is aware of God’s command and has in fact heard it directly from God.

Second, the couple apparently has enough information from God to understand rationally the dire consequences of eating from the tree. When tempted, Adam tells the serpent of God’s warning

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that disobeying his command to shun the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil would result in damnation:

. . . on þone deaðes beam bedroren ne wurde, 
beswicen to swiðe, he cwæð þæt þa sweartan helle 
healdan sceolde se ðe bi his heortan wuht 
læðes gelæde. 

(528-31)

[not to be bereaved nor utterly betrayed on that tree of death, 
he said that the person who by his heart did evil 
should inhabit black hell.]

The severe consequences of eating from the Tree of Knowledge, then, have been clearly outlined to both Adam and Eve, but the evil of man’s transgression is muted somewhat in the knowledge that God himself is the creator of this evil. It is important to remember that the tree itself is not evil in either the biblical account, Augustine’s writings, or the homilies of Ælfric, nor is God responsible for creating evil in any of these primary sources. Rather, man brings evil into the world through his disobedience. The Genesis B poet, while attempting to offer this theological truth, simultaneously raises age-old questions about the origin of evil—unintentionally attributing God, the creator of evil, with some responsibility for the Fall of Man.

While clearly showing the Tree of Knowledge itself to be evil and underlining God’s responsibility in its creation, the Genesis B poet also shows some ambivalence toward human behavior surrounding the Tree.39 He emphasizes human guilt at the same time he sympathizes with the couple and rationalizes their actions, which in turn affects the reader’s understanding of the role of Adam and Eve in the Fall. On the one hand, the poet alters several details to underscore Adam and Eve’s responsibility for disobeying God. On the other, he justifies their actions by emphasizing the sensory aspects of the tree. One such instance, already mentioned in

connection with God’s creation of the trees, is found in the way the Tree of Life and the Tree of Death stand close in proximity to Adam and Eve, as if the trees themselves are responsible for this intimate geographical location rather than the more mobile human couple. Next, Satan’s messenger turned serpent literally winds himself around the tree of death and plucks a fruit, first offering it to Adam. His intimate connection with the Tree of Death—that is, his tangible presence on the Tree—intimates to the couple that the tree and its fruit is not dangerous in contradiction to God’s warning.

In accordance with ascetic trends of the time of the manuscript’s assemblage, the Genesis B text uses the Tree of Knowledge to warn its reader to treat physical sensations with suspicion. Dyan Elliott argues that the rise of heresies that “tended to reject marriage altogether” around 1000 A.D. were a result of monastic asceticism, and, she writes, “The appearance of the various heresies suggests that the times were auspicious for a forceful resurfacing of spiritual marriage among the laity.”

The narrative reflects this controversy. The serpent, which first offers the fruit to Adam, asks the man to trust his physical sense of touch and taste in order to be transformed spiritually and physically.

[Take this fruit in hand, bite it and taste. You will become unfettered in your breast; your form will become more beautiful.]

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40 Spiritual Marriage: Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 96 and 97, respectively.
Although Adam does not succumb to the lies of Satan’s verbose and manipulative messenger, Eve is more susceptible to his sensory appeal.\textsuperscript{41} Notwithstanding the poet’s sympathetic treatment of Eve, he omits a detail from the biblical account that portrays her more favorably. Whereas the scriptural narrative observes that Eve sees that the fruit’s appearance is pleasing before she eats it (Gen. 3:6), in \textit{Genesis B} only after she eats it does it become physically appealing: “Adam, frea min, / þis ofet is swa swete, / bliðe in breostum” (“Adam, my lord, this fruit is so sweet, agreeable in my breast,” 655-56). Having consumed the fruit, Eve is convinced of its goodness from its taste. Her intellect also seems expanded: “Wearð me on hige leohte / utan and innan, siðþan ic þæs ofætes onbat” (“My mind has become enlightened without and within, since I tasted of the fruit,” 676-77). The taste of the fruit does not accord with God’s command not to eat of it, and its transformational powers, to Eve, appear to be positive. Since God presumably creates natural physical desires, the couple understandably is deceived by the sweetness of the evil fruit. This idea reflects the contemporary understanding that sensory pleasure is often evil in the sight of God.

Despite the initial impression Eve receives of personal and positive transformation through the fruit, the \textit{Genesis B} poet makes it very clear, in contrast to other Old English poems, that the creative agency of this particular tree is destructive. The \textit{B} poet in no way uses the Tree of Death or its fruit to completely exonerate the couple. In fact, he balances the theological implications of his depiction seen thus far—that God is the originator of evil, that Adam and Eve

make their decision to disobey despite the obvious nature of that evil, that evil itself offers
pleasure that is forbidden by God—by allowing his reader insight into the true nature of the
forbidden fruit.\footnote{For a discussion of Eve’s sensory transformation, see Davis, “Changing Senses,” especially at 126.} However, the insidious potency of the tree and its fruit is unparalleled in extant
Old English texts. After Eve submits to the serpent’s deception, the poet continues to underscore
the invasive power of “deaðes beames/ weorcsumne wæstm” (“the tree of death’s hurtful fruit,”
593-94). He comments that Eve bears one apple in her hands, but the apple she has already eaten
lies at her heart.

\begin{verbatim}
Sum heo hire on handum bær, sum hire æt heortan læg,
appel unsælga, ḣone hire ær forbead
drihtna drihten, deaðbeames ofet. . .
\end{verbatim}

(636-38)

[One she carried in her hands, one lay at her heart,
unlucky apple, the death-tree’s fruit
that the lord of lords before forbade her.]

The words imply that the apple Eve has eaten taints her soul. It is now a permanent part of her
being. The fruit similarly infects Adam: “Swa hit him on innan com, / hran æt heortan” (“As it
came in him, touched at the heart,” 723-24). Through the portrayal of the Tree of Knowledge, the
\textit{Genesis B} poet implies that evil is obvious to the beholder, but the closer one moves to evil, the
more attractive it becomes. Once it is consumed, its damage is permanent.

Conversely, the poet makes it abundantly clear that man needs only to leave alone the
Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and its abhorrent and bitter fruit, in order to earn heaven
and wealth. The text emphasizes that God gave paradise and prosperity to humanity on the
condition that they reject the fruit of this one tree:

\begin{verbatim}
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . ac he þeoda gehwam
hefonrice forgeaf, halig drihten,
widbradne welan, gif hie ḣone wæstm an
\end{verbatim}
lætan wolden þæt laðe treow  
on his bogum bær, bitre gefyllæd.  

(641-45)

[Holy Lord gave the kingdom of heaven to his people,  
wide-spreading prosperity, if they would leave alone  
that one fruit, which the loathed tree  
bore on its boughs, filled with bitterness.]

Man’s situation, his prosperity increasing if he leaves alone the fruit, stands in direct contrast to  
the way prosperity is pictured vis-à-vis trees in poems like *Maxims I*, discussed in chapter two,  
where man’s fruitfulness is best gained by modeling a living tree. Dated by Patrick Conner to the  
mid-tenth century, this catalogue poem (or wisdom poem) offers the truism that faith, like trees,  
should grow and increase out of the heart of the innocent.43

Treo sceolon brædan ond treow weaxan,  
sio geond bilwitra breost arised.  

(158-60)

[Tree should broaden and truth (or faith) increase,  
yonder it springs from the breast of the innocent.]

Whereas faith is seen in *Maxims I* to be most dynamic when it models a tree’s growth pattern, in  
*Genesis B*, the fruit of the *laðe treow* (“loathed tree”) spreads the scope of evil and bitterness  
beyond its own branches into the very heart of the human individual. Thus, the *Genesis B* poet  
notes that *widbradne welan* (“wide-spreading prosperity”) comes only through a rejection of the  
biblical Tree of Knowledge.

The Junius manuscript’s incorporation of the Tree of Knowledge as the Tree of Death,  
fruitful with bitterness, loss, and the sorrow of hell, demonstrates that diverse beliefs on the  
significance of the biblical tree in the late tenth century allowed for such an interpretation within  
a carefully prepared text designed for the spiritual edification of its reader. An earlier audience,

one closer and more inured to the pagan worship of trees, may have been reluctant to demonize even the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The radical discrepancy between hermeneutic and cultural views of the Tree of Knowledge and the portrayal of the Tree of Death found in the Genesis B text may suggest that in the wake of the monastic reforms, a growing willingness to attribute evil to natural objects made the Old Saxon interpolation an acceptable, even desirable, literary choice within the Junius manuscript.44

Genesis A

The earlier Genesis A account of the biblical tree is more in line with what the reader might expect from other Anglo-Saxon poems depicting trees. Whereas the interpolated Genesis B depiction of the Tree of Knowledge and its fruit concentrates on its negative agency and sensory potency, the earlier account places more emphasis on the actions surrounding the tree, which neutralizes the implications of the B account’s negative portrayal. The Genesis A poet does not implicate God in the creation of evil through negative adjectives that describe the Tree of Knowledge or its produce or rationalize man’s disobedience through the sensory appeal of the fruit. Instead, the poet concentrates on the actions perpetrated by Adam and Eve, explaining their transgression in terms the Anglo-Saxon reader would understand. Except for the brief characterization of its fruit as unfreme (“injury” or “damage,” 893), the A narrative describes man’s actions, not the tree’s agency, as evil. One example of how the A poet refocuses blame on man, rather than on the Tree of Knowledge, is found in God’s words to Eve. The text uses verbs to emphasize Eve’s guilt: she has greedily grasped the tree, taken the fruit, eaten of it, and given it to Adam:

[you covetously snatched at the tree, seized fruit from the tree’s branches, and in enmity with me ate the damage, gave to Adam fruit that to you two were strictly forbidden by my words . . .]

Although here the fruit is characterized as harmful, the following clause, which reminds the reader that Adam and Eve have been warned sufficiently, underlines the idea that the injury is not contained in the fruit but in the disobedience of God’s command. Even though Eve blames the serpent for its deception, as she does in the biblical account, she also acknowledges her *forsceape* ("evil deed," 898) and *scylfrece* ("wicked craving"), and she characterizes her crime as a hostile act of enmity toward God and an act of robbery:

[I shamefully perpetrated the hostile attack, worked enmity, and robbed the tree in the grove then, as it was not right, and ate the fruit.]

Eve of *Genesis A* never characterizes the tree, or its fruit, as evil, and her confession omits any blame of the tree or its fruit, a valid charge if it were based on the *Genesis B* account; instead, the poet concentrates on her actions as shameful and hostile. Robbery, violation of a lord’s command, and enmity, actions that the *Genesis A* poet highlights, are all deeds that the Anglo-Saxon reader understands to be problematic.45

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Although the *Genesis A* text connects the forbidden apple to misfortune and nakedness, the poet’s insistence on the literal nature of the Tree resists the allegorical reading found in *Genesis B*, offsetting the intimation of the interpolation that God or the tree itself might have some accountability for the Fall of Man. In Genesis 3, God simply asks Adam if he knows he is naked because he ate of the forbidden fruit. However, in the parallel passage in *Genesis A*, the poet extends God’s words to associate Adam’s awareness of his nakedness with misfortune, shame, suffering, and worldly care. The text echoes Adam’s description of the attempt to cover his nakedness with the words *wrihst* (“clothe” or “conceal”) and *þecest* (“thatch” or “cover”), the same root verbs previously used by Adam. The feeble attempt to cover his nakedness becomes a metaphor for man’s spiritual inadequacies. Yet the *A* poet resists any impulse to expand on the metaphor and again grounds his reader in literal reality by tracing the inadequacy of trees to protect Adam after the Fall back to the very specific forbidden fruit, this time, *æppel*, rather than the more general terms *wæstm* (“produce” or “fruit”) or *blædu* (“blossom” or “fruit”):

For hwon wast þu wean and wrihst sceome,  
gesyhst sorge, and þin sylf þecest  
líc mid leafum, sagast lifceare  
hean hygegeomor, þæt þe sie hrægles þearf,  
nymþe ðu æppel ænne byrgde  
of ðam wudubeame þe ic þe wordum forbead?  
(876-81)

[Why are you aware of misfortune? Why do you cover your shame, see sorrow, and conceal your body with leaves, express care about life that you need clothing, abject and sad in mind, unless you ate an apple of that forest tree which I forbade you with my words?]

Gillian Overing observes “that apples were remarkably unstigmatized” and notes that in charms and spells, the term often seemed to have the generic meaning of fruit.46 The use of *wudubeame*

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(“forest tree”) at the same time makes this a much more generic tree than the Genesis B poet’s Tree of Death: the only unique thing about this apple tree is that God used words to forbid man from tasting its fruit. As such, the Genesis A poet seems more interested in scriptural and patristic accuracy than is the Genesis B interpolation, which succeeds in its implicit goals of contrasting good and evil and explaining the deceptive attractiveness of evil but in so doing raises more theological questions than it settles.

Despite significant differences in the portrayal of the biblical trees between Genesis A and B, one reference in A offers up a connection between the two poems and helps explain why the compiler found Genesis B compelling enough to include it within the narrative. In these lines, the Genesis A poet comes close to its own allegorical version of the Tree of Death. Following a description of Cain’s murder of Abel, the A poet describes the spread of evil beyond Eden as a twig of evil that engenders hatred and violence, producing branches of sin across the world. This allegorical tree in Genesis A parallels the Tree of Death in Genesis B, depicting a more painful second fall of sorts—there is no doubt that man, not God, is responsible for this allegorical tree of evil. For the A poet, it would seem that the first, original Fall, is not enough to explain eternal consequences for man. A second fall, and man’s creation of a second “tree of knowledge” satisfies any problem the reader might have with man’s eternal damnation. This time, the consequences are fully deserved:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Cwealmdreore swelah} & \quad \text{þæs middangeard, monnes swate.} \\
\text{ÆAfter wælswenge} & \quad \text{wea wæs æræred,} \\
\text{tregena tuddor.} & \quad \text{Of ðam twige siððan} \\
\text{ludon laðwende} & \quad \text{leng swa swiðor} \\
\text{reðe wæstme.} & \quad \text{Ræhton wide} \\
\text{geond werþeoda} & \quad \text{wrohtes telgan,} \\
\text{hrinon hearmtanas} & \quad \text{hearde and sare} \\
\text{drihta bearnum,} & \quad \text{(doð gieta swa),}
\end{align*}
\]
of þam brad blado bealwa gehwilces
sprytan ongunnan.

(985-95)

[The earth swallowed blood shed in death, man’s blood. Because of that deadly swing woe was raised up, the offspring of miseries. From that twig hateful and violent fruit sprang up after, the longer the more fiercely. The branches of the sin reached widely throughout the nations. Shoots of sorrow lay hold of the children of men harsh and painfully—as they yet do. From them ample fruits of each evil began to sprout.]

This time, Cain, not God, plants the tree with his brother’s murder. The twig of woe quickly emerges from the ground and produces deadly fruit, and the longer it is allowed to flourish the more fiercely its produce multiplies. Its growth is both rapid and massive, its branches and shoots, sin and sorrow, represented as arms and hands that reach and lay hold violently of the people of all nations throughout the world. The branches and shoots of this figurative tree, then, take root in individuals and quickly develop into ample fruit of evil. This tree is absolutely malignant, a far better description of what the Genesis B poet terms deaðes beam—but because the tree is planted by man rather than by God, and because it is an allegorical tree, the A poet unleashes its negative agency in a way from which he has refrained in his depiction of the material object. Of course, since no distinction between Genesis A and B exists in the manuscript, the medieval reader would leave the text with the manuscript’s overall message of the horrific nature of evil and its ability to multiply exponentially.

Because the A poet portrays the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in a manner that accords with biblical and patristic depictions, altering these interpretations only to reinforce connections with Anglo-Saxon arboriculture, it is clear that the poet is most concerned with making his text relevant to his audience by using contemporary associations while maintaining
theological accuracy. Since the narrative is interrupted with the *Genesis B* interpolation, it is impossible to speculate on the *A* poet’s full treatment of the biblical tree. Based on the portions that remain, however, he did not associate the Tree of Knowledge with the source of all evil, and he certainly would not have portrayed it as negatively as his Old Saxon counterpart. It then seems reasonable to consider that he sees the allegorical tree of evil stemming from Cain’s murder of Abel as a more appropriate origin point to explain the existence of evil in the world, and indeed, considers the Tree of Knowledge in much the same light as does Augustine or Ælfric.

**The Junius Illustrations**

The *Genesis B* text’s depiction of the Tree of Knowledge contrasts sharply with the context established by the biblical account, patristic sources, and Anglo-Saxon arboriculture, but it also has the allegorical effect of characterizing the biblical tree as evil that resonates with the ascetic strains of the monastic reform movement. Its inconsistencies are somewhat modified by the *A* text’s more literal and more sympathetic treatment of the tree. What of the manuscript illustrations, though? What role do they play in MS Junius 11’s overall portrait of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil? The illustrations themselves follow a pictorial narrative outlined by Catherine Karkov: Creation, Eve, Adam, and Paradise, Exile, Geneology and Social Order, Noah and Rebirth, and Abraham.⁴⁷ Although the scribe, copying from much earlier poems, left spaces for an artist to illustrate the text, the manuscript is “unified in the sense that the artist, perceiving the poet’s intentions, attempted to furnish illustrations that whenever possible

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complemented the text.” 48 Thomas Ohlgren argues that the artist succeeded: “The 54 drawings interpolated into the poem reveal the artist’s nearly wholesale assimilation of the poem’s content and style.” 49 Karkov agrees, noting that the “drawings constitute yet another level of paraphrase and translation, referring not only to the poems they accompany and their textual sources, but to a range of other texts and pictorial traditions as well.” 50 Certainly in the Genesis illustrations that include trees, the artist attempts to reconcile the poetic narrative with the biblical account and patristic writings, although at times, he is more concerned with artistic symmetry than, for example, making sure the manuscript audience can identify the particular trees mentioned in the text.

The drawings, more so than the texts of MS Junius 11, represent hermeneutic ideas contemporary to the manuscript’s construction. The artist softens the effect of some of the theological inaccuracies present particularly in the Genesis B interpolation, particularly the implication of the Tree of Knowledge as evil and God’s intimate connection with the tree. Through his depiction, rather, he plays up the inference that the tree is related to sexual carnality. He is closest to the Genesis B narrative when he emphasizes the deceptive nature of temptation.

In contrast to either the A or B poets, the manuscript artist depicts the paradisal trees to suggest that the Fall is related to sexual transgression. For example, contrary to Augustine and Ælfric’s teaching that sexual intercourse without lust for the purpose of procreation would have been sanctioned in the Garden of Eden, the artist carefully places the Tree of Knowledge as a physical barrier between Adam and Eve’s union. On page eleven of the manuscript, the first


50 Karkov, 17.
illustration that depicts the paradisal trees (pl. I), a central tree with a peacock at its base is flanked by Adam and Eve who grasp trees at the left and the right of the frame. As Herbert Broderick observes, the branches of the outer trees have “pronounced sexual connotations in this pre-lapsarian state.” Other than to note that the sexual features suggested by the fruit and flowers “give added significance to the generative associations of the Tree of Life,” which he takes to be the tree held by Adam, Broderick does not expand on this finding. However, in light of Ælfric’s (and the Junius artist’s) intimation that the Fall of Man may be related to sexual sin, this line of reasoning deserves more careful analysis. In the illustration, Adam holds a stem containing a flower or fruit that appears like a cluster of five grapes, while Eve clutches a branch that terminates with an open, triangular flower at the tree on the right. Each outermost tree appears to mirror the gender of the one who grasps it, as if to imply that God, who presides at the top of the frame in a posture of blessing as he observes his creation, approves of their sex (that is, their distinct sexual characteristics, but not their sexual union).

In his illustrations of the Tree of Knowledge, the Junius artist implies that not only is the Fall associated with sexual transgression—as Augustine and Ælfric assert that sinful sexual desire arises only after the Fall—but he insinuates that sexual intercourse itself may be its cause. If the central tree is the Tree of Knowledge, as Broderick proposes, then it would seem here—in its position separating Adam and Eve—to represent the pair’s unconsummated marriage or perhaps their chastity. If, however, the central tree is the Tree of Life, as Israel Gollancz

52 Broderick, 184.
suggests, then only three conclusions are possible. First, either the tree on the left or the tree on
the right represents the Tree of Knowledge, which presents the difficulty of identifying the tree
and the problem of Adam or Eve even touching the tree that God has prohibited. Second, if none
of the trees is the Tree of Knowledge, then it is possible that the artist omitted the Tree of
Knowledge to suggest that God did not approve of this tree (and thus, to indicate God’s
prohibition). A final possibility is that the artist is not particularly interested in the Tree of
Knowledge at all. From the illustration, however, it is reasonable to conclude that the artist uses
trees to at least intimate Adam and Eve’s sexual innocence before the Fall.

Combined with the somewhat androgynous nudity of Adam and Eve and the physical
distance separating the pair, the manifestations of the Tree of Knowledge in the late tenth-
century illustrations imply that God’s prohibition is related to sex—an insinuation not seen in the
text from the much earlier eighth-century *Genesis A* or the ninth-century *Genesis B*. Like the
drawing on page eleven of the manuscript (pl. I), the illustration of Adam and Eve in Paradise on
page thirteen (pl. II) also features three trees. This time the outermost trees are flourishing with
more fruit. Two open flowers and two bunches of grapes are arranged symmetrically on the left
tree, at which Adam gestures without touching, and two clusters of grapes (or grape-like flowers)
reach in and up toward Eve’s gesturing hand on the rightmost tree. As in the previous illustration
(pl. I), the artist has carefully separated the couple with the central tree, although this time each
individual carefully points toward the closest outermost tree without touching it. The fruitfulness
of the trees, in contrast to the careful separation of Adam and Eve which continues through the
picture cycle until Adam takes the fruit from Eve on page 31 (pl. VIa) and the couple recognizes
their nakedness on page 34 (pl. VIIa), suggests that fertility is limited to plant life before the Fall.

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53 Israel Gollancz identifies the central tree as the Tree of Life because the peacock at its base is a symbol of
Gollancz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1927), li].
of Man. On page 20 (pl. III), the only drawing that depicts a serpent, the artist features three trees at the top of the full-page drawing, all laden with grape clusters like the bunch that Adam holds in the first picture discussed (pl. I). The eight clusters of grapes on the Tree of Knowledge, along with the serpent whose body winds around the tree, all lean invitingly toward Eve, now to the left of Adam. Eve, although eye-to-eye with the serpent, has turned her body away from the tree. The trees at the right and center of the picture are similar but less fertile in appearance, with a less developed trunk and branch system and about half as much fruit as the Tree of Knowledge. The depiction of the Tree of Knowledge in this illustration suggest that, for Eve, temptation arises from both the deceptively attractive appearance of the forbidden tree and the fact that it appears much like, but better than, the other paradisal trees that have been expressly allowed. Thus, the artist depicts the nature of temptation, and the trees laden with fruit suggestive of masculine sexuality intimate that danger resides in Adam’s sexual impulses.

The manuscript illustrations of the picked forbidden fruit (pl. IV-VIa) point to, if not a misogynistic impulse, perhaps a fear of the threat female sexuality offers to the male. The artist uses the appearance of the fruit along with Eve’s appearance, gestures, and postures to associate the woman’s body with the fruit. In the illustrations, the forbidden fruit, two concentric circles with a point in the middle, are suggestive of eyes or even breasts. The artist draws the reader’s gaze to the three plucked fruits in the half page illustration on page 28 (pl. V). Biting into the fruit held with her right hand, Eve takes a second apple with her left hand from the angel’s right hand, which the angel grasps, along with another almost identical but larger apple in his left hand.

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54 For discussion of the outline of another figure behind Adam and its relationship to the Tree of Knowledge, see Ohlgren, “Visual Language,” 259.

55 For the artist’s representations of Satan and his followers as male “sexualized bodies” who are associated with Adam and “male disobedience,” see Karkov, 68.

56 Overing, “Of Apples,” notes that apples [æppel] and eyeballs [æppel, “apple of the eye”] are “semantically linked” in Old English.
hand, which he holds out to Adam. The fruit is identical to that on page 31 (pl. VIa), in which one tree appears to the right of Adam who accepts the fruit from Eve. Eve crouches forward as she passes the fruit, clutched in both hands, to Adam. The illustrator identifies Eve with the fruit by its proximity and closeness in scale to the woman’s face. That several of the illustrations associate the Tree of Knowledge and its fruit with sexual temptation is supported by Barbara Raw’s findings that this illustration is “strikingly like” a tenth-century Physiologus drawing that “illustrates a passage warning monks against the fire of sexual desire, a fire symbolized by the two stones held by the woman.” The gendered overtones of the Junius illustrations are much more subtle in the text, but Overing and Karkov do note places in Genesis B where Eve becomes a threatening sexual object. Overing observes that there are “moments when body, language, sin, food, and Eve collide—such as when Eve herself becomes, embodies, temptation, holding one apple in her hand and nursing another in her heart.” Karkov writes, “In eating the apple, the physical boundaries of the body are also transgressed and Eve’s body becomes identified with the forbidden fruit.” Although Overing and Karkov use the text of the manuscript to draw their conclusions, the illustrations appear to support their association of Eve with the fruit.

The Junius manuscript illustrations use the paradisal trees to suggest sexuality and imply that the Fall is related to sexual temptation or lack of sexual restraint, focusing on human agency and thus offering a corrective to the Genesis B interpolation’s focus on the tree itself as evil. In addition to gendering the trees and associating Eve’s body with the fruit, the artist’s drawing of overgrown, unpruned trees on page 24 (pl. IV) points to the a lack of restraint or self-discipline,

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57 Raw, “Probable Derivation,” 141-42. Burchmore uses the drawing in her argument that the artist may have attempted to allegorize “feminine seduction” (144).


59 Karkov, 71.
which reinforces the suggestion of sexual temptation. The outermost trees are an interwoven
tangle of branches and trumpet-shaped flowers, “tangled, acanthus-like growths.”60 Although
everything in the illustration points to the fruit held in Eve’s hand, the detail is in the intertwined,
overgrown, untidy branches of the trees, the wings of the messenger, and his fingers arching
toward Eve’s hand that holds the apple. Eve holds her left elbow as in the previous picture, but
whereas in the earlier illustration the grip suggests restraint, here it is as if to support the weight
of the inordinately heavy apple. The interwoven, serpentine pattern found in the larger two trees
intimate Eve’s figurative bondage that follows her sin. The snaking, vine-like branches are
evocative of Karen Cherewatuk’s assertion that the Genesis B text uses images of twisting and
turning to suggest “a perverse moral stance, sin, and the fall.”61 Although Cherewatuk focuses on
the posture and movement of Adam, Eve, and the serpent/messenger within the text, her
argument can be applied to the winding, twisting branches of the trees in this illustration of the
manuscript.

By making the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil either unidentifiable or changing in
shape, the artist mutes the impression of the biblical tree as the evil Tree of Death given by the
Genesis B poet. In the initial illustration depicting the paradisal trees (pl. I), the Tree of
Knowledge is not readily identifiable, although the lower part of the drawing features the central
tree and the two gendered trees clutched by Adam and Eve. As Broderick notes, neither of these
trees can be the Tree of Knowledge because the pair is expressly forbidden from touching it.62 If
the artist intends the central tree to represent the Tree of Knowledge, however, there is nothing
distinctive to set it apart from the framing trees. In fact, only two of the illustrations possibly

60 Broderick, 206. See also Karkov, 71.
62 Broderick, 181.
depict the Tree of Knowledge as the obscure, dark Tree of Death described in the *Genesis B* interpolation, and even in these drawings, positive identification of the biblical tree is impossible. On page 13 (pl. II), the central tree in this illustration is either immature or a small variety, drawn in dark outline and extending only to the waistline of Adam and Eve. Gollancz believes that the trees on the left and right are the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and the middle tree, because of its three separate stems, is a reference to the Rood Tree legend.63 Broderick counters that there is no evidence that this is a reference to the Rood tree, but instead it may be the Tree of Death portrayed in the manuscript text.64 He bases his assertion on God’s prohibition to both Adam and Eve, which corresponds to the text on the page (lines 235-45). The central tree shares little resemblance to the Tree of Death described later in the *Genesis B* text, however. Its stems and branches arch gracefully, the twigs on left and right scrolling symmetrically and balancing the vertical central stem that terminates in a leaf or flower.

By contrast, the small, dark tree on page 24 (pl. IV) is more readily identified because the text above it corresponds with lines 476-490 of the poem that describe the Tree of Death and the consequences of eating its fruit. The trees in this half-page illustration resemble those on page 13 (pl. II) with two tall plants on left and right with a short tree or shrub in dark outline in the center. Only one flower, or cluster of grapes, is present on the tree to the left of Eve, as if God has already withdrawn the ample provision of the garden. Eve stands to its right between it and the central tree, “a delicate, dark brown shrub that is echoed by a smaller sprout in the center of the seven arched compartments at the bottom of the composition.”65 The dark central tree points directly upwards to the apple, which is held gingerly upright in Eve’s fingers, the ground beneath

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63 *Caedmon Manuscript*, xli. See also Karkov, 65.
64 Broderick, 189.
65 Ibid., 206.
it rocky and devoid of plants, the columns underneath suggesting the encroach of hell upon paradise. The repeated sprout below the Tree of Death suggests that the root of the forbidden tree originates in hell, which also is depicted underneath the three illustrations preceding this one. Alternatively, the artist may suggest that the Tree of Death is a type of key to hell’s entrance since a line separates the columns and smaller sprout from the garden.

The shifting appearance of the Tree of Knowledge in the manuscript illustrations reveals the deceptive nature of temptation. For instance, the artist on page 20 (pl. III) clearly identifies the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil as a fruitful attractive tree that is almost impossible to resist. The tree on the left must be the Tree of Knowledge, as the serpent is wrapped around it as the Genesis B text describes—“Wearp hine þa on wyrmes lic and wand him þa ymbutan / þone deaðes beam” (“he changed himself then into a worm’s body and wound himself about the tree of death,” 491-92). In the illustration, the serpent is almost indiscernible from the ample fruit and branches without a closer look. Of the three trees, which are similar in appearance, the Tree of Knowledge is the tallest, has the most branches, and is the most fruitful, containing eight grape-like bunches in comparison to the tree in the middle, with three, and the tree on the right, with four. The attractive tree and its fruit contrasts with the text of Genesis B, which only notes that the fruit is appealing after Eve has already eaten from it (655-56). In keeping with the B text’s intent of portraying Eve sympathetically, the artist uses the pleasing appearance of the tree before the Fall to help explain her motives for eating from the Tree. Intimating that the Tree represents temptation, particularly sexual temptation, the artist uses this attractive image to show that sin’s appearance is often appealing until after its true nature is revealed.

Like Ælfric, the Junius artist deflects attention from the tree itself and redirects it to the action and consequences of disobedience, but he accomplishes this by changing the shape and
depiction of the Tree of Knowledge throughout the series of illustrations. This point is supported by the stark landscape of the half page illustration on page 28 (pl. V), which effectually takes the focus of the Fall away from the Tree of Death and back to the action of disobedience. Instead of three central trees, the three characters now dominate the scene. The barren ground suggests that paradise is already lost to the couple. This inference is intensified in the two frames on the full page drawing of page 31 (pl. VIa). Each features one sparsely leafed, physically unattractive tree that symbolizes the consequence of sin. Its proximity to Adam and Eve in the aftermath of their transgression, as well as the fact that these are the only illustrations featuring just one tree, suggests that the artist may intend it to represent the Tree of Death. In the top frame, the tree appears to have heavy bark, few leaves, and no fruit. The artist certainly means this to be the Tree of Knowledge, which even as Adam accepts the apple, is taking on a more unattractive form. Immediately under the illustration of Eve’s deception of Adam, the Tree once again takes central stage (pl. VIb). No longer luxurious, one left branch appears to have been pruned and sprouts with an outline that is reminiscent of the shrub-like Tree of Death depicted on page 24 (pl. IV). Eve is huddled at its base, her face cradled in her hands, and Adam is turned away from her, from the Tree, and from the messenger who hovers at the right of the frame as if about to depart. This illustration effectively identifies Eve with the Tree of Knowledge and seems to focus the blame for the Fall on Eve.

Comparing these drawings to the same scenes in the Old English Hexateuch, the earliest extant copy of the first six Old Testament books in the English vernacular, reveals the Junius illustrator’s interest in refocusing the textual account on human agency, in suggesting the Fall is related to sexual sin, and in maintaining the narrative’s emphasis on the deceptive nature of temptation. The comparison also demonstrates that the Junius illustrator resists an inclination to
move too far outside the parameters of the textual narrative of *Genesis A* and *B*. The Old English Hexateuch, prefaced by Ælfric and completed in the first half of the eleventh century, contains eight illustrations that appear to depict one or both of the paradisal trees.⁶⁶ Where the Junius manuscript illustrations containing the biblical trees focus almost exclusively on Adam and Eve’s actions, only half of the Hexateuch drawings contain the human couple. The rest are concerned with the creation of plants and trees, including the two biblical trees (Gen. 1:11-13; 2:8-10), God’s command to Adam (Gen. 2:16-17), and an angel’s guarding of the Tree of Life after the exile (Gen. 3:24). Moreover, the Hexateuch is more consistent in its presentation of the paradisal trees, unlike the Junius manuscript in which the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil changes in physical appearance after the Fall. The Hexateuch illustrator goes farther than the Junius illustrator in suggesting that the Fall is related to sexual intercourse. The illustration after Adam and Eve eat the fruit depicts God observing the naked couple. Their bodies intertwine with branches in a reclining position, Adam on top of Eve, as if to say that the act of disobedience was in fact the sexual union of the couple.⁶⁷ The Junius illustrator, while clearly associating the Fall more directly than the *Genesis A* or *B* poets with sexual transgression, does not go this far in his interpretation of the text. He rather contents himself with the insinuation while focusing on the text’s emphasis on human action and the changing face of temptation.

**Conclusion**

The Junius illustrator, unlike the *Genesis B* poet, does not portray the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil as evil, and unlike the *A* poet, he is not particularly invested in literal adherence

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⁶⁶ *The Old English Illustrated Hexateuch: British Museum Cotton Claudius B. IV*, EEMF, vol. 18, ed. C. R. Dodwell and Peter Clemoes (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde og Bagger, 1974), at 3r, 5r, 6r, 6v, 7r, 7v, and 8r.

⁶⁷ Karkov considers the Junius illustrations “models of restraint” in comparison to the Hexateuch drawing (75).
to the biblical account. In fact, it is almost impossible to determine which tree is supposed to be
the Tree of Knowledge because in most of the illustrations the trees are actually quite similar in
appearance. Because of this, the artist takes the focus off the particular tree and its characteristics
and emphasizes instead the actions of Adam and Eve through their positions in relation to the
trees and each other in the illustrations. He does, however, use the trees in his illustration to
suggest that the Fall is related to sexual temptation and that Eve bears the primary responsibility
for Adam’s disobedience. Conversely, it appears that the *Genesis B* poet has turned to allegory in
his depiction of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and in so doing, has run into the
problems that Augustine warns of in his writings. Although the *B* interpolation interrupts *Genesis
A*’s full treatment of the Tree of Knowledge, in the brief section that remains it is clear that the *A*
poet, instead of focusing on the tree, deliberates instead on Eve’s act of enmity, robbery, and
greed in the aftermath of the Fall. However, this still leaves us with the larger question of what
the late-tenth or early eleventh-century reader of MS Junius 11 would assimilate about the Tree
of Knowledge.

If one accepts these readings of the Tree found in the Junius manuscript, then there is
every reason to believe that the composite Tree of Knowledge for the medieval reader portrays
aspects of nature as deceptive and demonstrates a distrust of nature. While man’s attraction to the
Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is understandable, giving in to this attraction is
unequivocally wrong. The composite Tree of Knowledge depicted in the three versions of MS
Junius 11 are closer to Ælfric’s interpretation, or at least the purposes of his interpretation, than
one might suppose at first reading. The Junius uses the Tree of Knowledge to demonstrate the
importance of obedience, even blind obedience, to God. Men—and women—the text suggests,
should obey even when a command does not make sense. Man’s lack of knowledge can send him
to his eternal damnation, so trusting God’s commands is imperative to his salvation. The *Genesis B* narrative’s sympathy for Adam and Eve might be seen as a reflection of Ælfric’s concern about his society’s tendency to minimize sin. It is also possible, however, that because of its depiction of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, the post-Benedictine reader of the Junius 11 manuscript would be more likely to conclude that even what appears like small sin is in reality momentous. In other words, the effect of the Junius Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is not inconsistent with that of Ælfric’s depiction, which would encourage men to avoid sin and do good works. If anything, the Junius account would encourage its reader to be cautious of temptation and would underscore the message that even when one does not understand God’s methods, he or she must submit to his authority. And, in keeping with Ælfric’s insistence on sexual cleanness, the reader who viewed the Junius pictures in conjunction with the text likely would at least connect the Fall of Man, through the images of the paradisal trees, to some type of sexual impurity. In short, the manuscript depiction, while increasing the reader’s belief that he likely would have made the same choice as Adam or Eve if placed in the same position, would also encourage that reader to eschew sin and embrace good works in accordance with the Bible and church doctrine.

Finally, although the *Genesis B* poet’s depiction of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil conflicts with the sympathetic portrayal of trees in Anglo-Saxon poetry and prose, the surrounding text of *Genesis A* and the manuscript illustrations, read in the context of patristic writings, suggests that the negative depiction of the tree itself is unique to its Old Saxon source rather than medieval English views. But clearly, none of the three creators of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Junius manuscript—the *A* poet, *B* poet, or artist—intend trees to be deified or venerated, the impulse seen in chapter two. Also, the fact that the carefully
prepared manuscript would include the *Genesis B* account points to the growing acceptance for
the allegorization of trees, even within scriptural accounts that the most influential patristic
writers and contemporary exegetes held to be literal. It points to the distancing of the English
individual from nature and a growing tolerance of the nature-culture divide. Finally, it suggests a
growing ambivalence about nature and sexuality in the late tenth-century and early eleventh-
century that is at least tangentially related to the monastic reform.
PLATE I  Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junius 11, p. 11: God Beholds Adam and Eve in Paradise

Copyright 1998 by Bodleian Library, University of Oxford. Used by permission.
PLATE VIIa  Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junius 11, p. 34 (top frame): Awareness of Nakedness
PLATE VIIb  Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junius 11, p. 34 (bottom frame): Adam and Eve Cover their Nakedness

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CHAPTER 4

THE TREE OF PENITENCE AND THE TREE OF VICES: THE PARSON’S NARRATIVE OF TRANSFORMATION

Where the biblical Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil captivated the medieval imagination and offered priests and theologians a compelling subject for exegesis and homiletic teaching, allegorical trees from the early twelfth century through the late fourteenth century and beyond became useful classificatory didactic tools in the clerical teaching of moral systems.

Arguably, Chaucer’s Parson’s Tale—the earliest extant penitential handbook bearing the name of a non-cleric—is the most well known medieval text featuring allegorical trees. This final piece of the Canterbury collection is important for its wide dissemination, its non-ecclesiastical origin, and the development of both allegorical and biblical trees into a unified narrative that considerably diminishes the Tree of Vices’ traditional purpose as a dictate for human conduct.

Chaucer’s use of the vernacular rather than Latin contrasts to most medieval English depictions of allegorical trees, the result of which is to invite non-ecclesiastic readers into the complexity of the allegory as well as to “laicize it.” The Parson’s Tale, which develops the Tree of

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1 For this chapter, I am indebted to Nicole D. Smith, who generously shared her extensive knowledge of The Canterbury Tales and the Tree of Vices, and whose writing about the ParsT often served as a model for my own. See, for example, “The Parson’s Predilection for Pleasure,” SAC 28 (2006): 117-40. I am also deeply grateful to Robert Upchurch for improving my translations of Chaucer’s Latin sources.


4 See, for comparison, Richard Newhauser’s bibliography of treatises on the vices and virtues in The Treatise on Vices and Virtues in Latin and the Vernacular, Typologie des sources du moyen âge occidental, fasc. 68 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1993), which identifies 136 Latin works and only 10 Middle English examples of the genre.

5 Scanlon argues that “Chaucer’s narrative complexity” is “designed less to subvert clerical authority than to laicize it” (23). For the Wycliffite reform and lay instruction, see Katherine Little, “Chaucer’s Parson and the Specter of
Penitence, the cross, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and the Tree of Vices into a uniquely coherent narrative, moves away from the binary structure of conventional teachings on the allegorical and biblical trees that emphasizes a simple choice by which the individual might predetermine his or her eternal residence. Instead of juxtaposing virtue with vice or the Tree of Life (or the cross) with the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, Chaucer moves toward a more complex narrative of salvation, offering a constructive and functional doctrinal paradigm for his readers by positioning the Tree of Penitence in opposition to that of the Vices.

The end of *The Canterbury Tales*, of course, is an appropriate place in which to include a narrative that first begins with the journey to salvation, or the “wey” of penitence, and then reframes the metaphor as the Tree of Penitence. Chaucer structures the Tree of Penitence in three parts. The root of contrition is caused by six factors, one of which is the cross. The trunk, branches, and leaves of confession primarily address the Tree of Vices, the origin of which is rooted in the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Finally, the Tree of Penitence produces the fruit of satisfaction and the “blisse of hevene” (X.1076) that is “the fruyt of penaunce.” The simple framework of familiar allegorical and biblical trees is suited to a diverse, primarily rural society still tied to agriculture. Moreover, the assorted pilgrims of the *Canterbury Tales*, by virtue of undertaking the pilgrimage to Thomas à Becket’s shrine, purportedly seek to improve

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themselves. A pious subject incorporating some of the most popular allegorical and biblical images of the time would seem a fitting end to the tale-telling game initiated in the *General Prologue* of the collection, reminding both the pilgrims and readers of the *Canterbury Tales* that the underlying purpose of the pilgrimage is physical and spiritual healing.8

Because of the prevalence of Trees of Vices and Virtues in thirteenth and fourteenth-century medieval texts, manuscript illustrations, and even church frescoes,9 the eventual appearance of the Tree of Vices in response to Host Harry Bailey’s request for the Parson to “beth fructuous” (X.71) as he tells his “meditacioun” (X.69) is in no way unusual.10 However, it is notable that the Parson, who rejects “fables and swich wrecchednesse”(X.34), offers up a narrative in which the allegorical Tree of Penitence—rather than the more familiar Tree of Virtues—offers the “best sentence and moost solaas” (I.798) to promote the spiritual healing needed by the Canterbury pilgrims. Despite Host Bailey’s horticultural order to “be fructuous” and the Parson’s response, critics have not yet considered the *Tale* in the ecological context of medieval tree management. Such an analysis focuses on both the generative capacity of story telling and the way in which the biological processes illustrated by the *Tale* narrate a natural process by which an individual may gradually attain salvation.11 Reading the *Tale* as itself an allegorical tree planted by the Parson for the purpose of bearing fruit highlights three ideas. First,

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8 *General Prologue*, I.17-18.


10 Quotations from the *Canterbury Tales* are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), and are cited parenthetically by fragment and line number throughout the chapter. Italics reflect my own emphasis.

by opening his penitential manual with the pilgrimage motif that also initiates the Canterbury project before decisively replacing this metaphor with the Tree of Penitence for the remainder of the \textit{Tale}, the Parson suggests that the arboreal metaphor is a more effective depiction of the individual’s path to God. The metaphor becomes part of a larger discourse that draws upon horticultural and arboreal themes in order to illustrate the figurative fruits of salvation. Second, in contrast to his allegorical presentation of the Tree of Penitence and the Tree of Vices, the Parson bases his description of the cross and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil on the biblical narrative. As a result of the literal description, the biblical trees seem dwarfed by the organizing schema offered by the Tree of Penitence and the Tree of Vices in the \textit{Tale}. However, the biblical trees become the basis for the allegorical trees and thus an integral part of the narrative. Finally, the Tree of Vices with its extensive series of branches and twigs threatens—but fails—to overshadow the Tree of Penitence, whose salvific properties are ultimately figured in the holiest tree of all, the cross. Read in this context, the \textit{Parson’s Tale} reframes these well-known trees into a narrative that promotes a spontaneous, natural means to personal and radical transformation.

Pennaforte, Peraldus, or the two redactions of Peraldus’s work that have more directly influenced the Tale. Rather, the Tree of Penitence that structures the Parson’s narrative originates from John Chrystostom, and the Tree of Vices is a medieval commonplace. The interaction of the trees of penitence and vice in the Parson’s Tale constitutes a horticultural narrative that significantly alters traditional clerical presentations of the Tree of Vices and the salvation process. In this respect, my reading of the Tale differs from the analyses of those who treat it as purely a religious work, regard it as derivative, or affirm it and the Retraction as proof of Chaucer’s ironic genius. In contrast, I argue for the importance of reading the Parson’s Tale as a salvation story in which the Tree of Penitence becomes the Parson’s organizational strategy, the Tale’s primary protagonist, and the victorious opponent of the Tree of Vices.

Frequently diagrammed as neat organizational schematics by which the Church could dictate the characteristics of the saint or sinner to the laity, Trees of Vices and Virtues have a long history of textual transmission in England. The De fructibus carnis et spiritus of the early twelfth century, the first work “to portray specifically the seven capital sins by a tree with seven main branches,” popularized the Tree of Vices and the Tree of Virtues with their respective roots

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15 See, for example, Derek Pearsall, The Canterbury Tales (1985; reprint, London: Routledge, 1994), 289. This view contrasts with that of Wenzel. See note 12 above.

16 For a review of ironic readings of the narrators in relation to their tales, see David Lawton, Chaucer’s Narrators, Chaucer Studies, no. 13 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1985), 90, and 153-54, note 5.
of pride and humility. The tradition of the Deadly Sins, however, reaches back to the early Church fathers, beginning with Egyptian monk Evagrius (c. 345–399), who first catalogued the sins as eight logismoi (“thoughts”), Cassian (c. 360-435), who identified these thoughts as vitia (“sins”), and Gregory (c. 540-604), who reordered the sins into the scheme that persists today. Following Ælfric of Eynsham (c. 950-c. 1010) and Wulfstan, Archbishop of York (d. c. 1023), who are credited by Bloomfield with “firmly establish[ing] the concept of the vitia principalia in the English homiletic tradition,” several anonymous English homilies of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries contain allusions to these sins. Bloomfield notes that the chief sins are increasingly discussed in Lenten sermons until “it became almost traditional” to do so.

The popularity of writings on the seven deadly sins and the Tree of Vices in the later Middle Ages is no doubt due to the formalization of confession and lay instruction by the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. Indeed, Chaucer’s primary sources for the Parson’s Tale are two works motivated by the new canons, Raymund of Pennafort’s Summa de poenitentia (c. 1225) and

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18 See Bloomfield, esp. 69-74 and 106. For discussion of Cassian’s influence on Gregory, see Carole Straw, “Gregory, Cassian, and the Cardinal Vices,” in In the Garden of Evil: The Vices and Culture in the Middle Ages, ed. Richard Newhauser (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2005), 35-58.

19 Bloomfield, 116. See pages 111-115 for a discussion of Ælfric’s teachings on the subject, found primarily in the homilies on the First Sunday in Lent, the Middle Sunday in Lent, the Second Sunday after Epiphany, the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ, Sermo de memoria sanctorum, Sermon XXV on the Maccabees, and his pastoral letter to Wulfstan, “Quando dividis chrisma.” See especially “Midlent Sunday” (c. 992-93) in CHIII.12.483-86: “Se forma heafodleaher is gyfrenyss. Se oðer is galnyss; ðrydda, gytsung; feorða, weamet; fifta, unrotnys; sixta, asolcennyss oððe æmelnys; seofoða, ydel gylp; eahteoðe, modignyss.” [The first chief sin is greed or gluttony. Another is lust; third, avarice; fourth, anger; fifth, dissatisfaction; sixth, sloth or slackness; seventh, idle boasting; eighth, pride.] For Ælfric’s sources (primarily Cassian and Alcuin) and treatment of the chief sins in “Mid-Lent Sunday,” see CHIII 462-65. See also Siegfried Wenzel, “Preaching the Seven Deadly Sins,” in In the Garden of Evil: The Vices and Culture in the Middle Ages, ed. Richard Newhauser (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2005), 147-48. For Wulfstan, see Bloomfield, 114-16.

20 Bloomfield, 119.
Guilielmus Peraldus’s *Summa vitiorum* (1236). Trees are not featured in these two Dominican works out of France. However, Friar Laurent’s *Somme le roi* (c. 1279-80), “a popular religious compilation for the convenience and edification of well-informed laymen, summarizing the chief tents of the moral teachings of the Church,” is based primarily on Pennaforte and Peraldus and, like the *Parson’s Tale*, includes the Tree of Vices. Although Laurent opposes the Tree of Vices with the Tree of Virtues, which Chaucer excludes, the *Somme le roi* may well have been familiar to Chaucer. The treatise circulated in “at least ten independent English translations,” two of which were certainly written prior to the *Canterbury Tales*, the *Ayenbite of Inwyt* (1340) and *The Book of Vices and Virtues* (c. 1375). These translations retain imagery related to the Tree of Vices, as do a number of other didactic works from the early fourteenth century on.

In addition to a large number of medieval texts associating the chief sins with the tree image, artistic representations and diagrams of the Tree of Vices from the twelfth century on cemented its characteristics in viewers’ memories. In fact, medieval iconography of the Tree of Vices, the largest portion of the *Tale*, is a subject for another dissertation. One of the eleven illustrations of the Tree of Vices identified by the Index of Christian Art is found in a didactic manuscript with English origins: the De Lisle Psalter (Arundel MS 83 II), compiled in East Anglia between 1285-1330 and given in 1339 by Robert de Lisle to his daughter Audere for the

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22 Bloomfield, 125.

23 Ibid., 182.

24 See for example, the mid thirteenth-century *Manuel des Peches*, the Anglo-Norman predecessor of *Handlyng Synne* (O’Reilly, 85); the early fourteenth-century texts, *Handlyng Synne* and the *Gesta Romanorum*, a Latin exempla collection; *Speculum vitae* and *The Mirror of Life*, which are late fourteenth-century works related to the *Somme le Roi*; and *Desert of Religion* (Bloomfield, 171, 130-31, 178, and 179, respectively).

25 See Jennifer O’Reilly, 323-449, for a chapter on the subject.
ladies of a neighboring priory. And, given the presence of seven fourteenth-century church frescoes (in Bardwell, Cranborne, Crostwight, Dalham, Felstead, Hoxne, and South Leigh), it is tempting to speculate that Chaucer might have had an actual visual image in mind as he wrote.

One wall painting at Hoxne in Suffolk portrays two devils sawing through the base of the Tree of Vices: “The message seems to be that Evil, however it is manifested, ultimately contains the seeds of its own destruction.” This theme is consistent with Chaucer’s Tree of Vices, which successfully nourishes the Tree of Penitence only to find itself overshadowed and ultimately eliminated.

The origin of Chaucer’s Tree of Penitence is less clear than that of the well-known Tree of Vices. A didactic Anglo-Norman work of the late thirteenth century called the Compileison de Seinte Penance credits Chrystostom with the tree-image, and Wenzel considers this text an analogue to Chaucer’s passage on the Tree of Penitence. Like the Parson’s Tale, the Compileison “seems to be indebted to both Pennaforte and Peraldus” and incorporates a Gregorian list of vices, the branches of which “are carefully distinguished, and the usual scholastic definitions are made.” To my knowledge, the Anglo-Norman analogue is the only extant text other than the Parson’s Tale that uses both the Tree of Penitence and the list of vices. The Tale’s radical deviation from Pennaforte, its primary source for the section on penitence, therefore seems a conscious choice on Chaucer’s part. Chaucer’s substitution of Pennaforte’s image of the three day-journeys with the Tree of Penance is “startling”: Pennaforte, instead of

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30 Bloomfield, 144.
the three-parted image of the tree, provides “at least five different triadic images, all of biblical origin . . . Of these Pennaforte concentrates on the three day-journeys and uses that image to structure the following development.”31 Thus, although Chaucer has precedent for including both the Tree of Vices and the Tree of Penitence in the Tale, his (or an as yet undiscovered intermediary’s) choice to juxtapose the two trees for the duration of the Tale appears to be highly original—particularly in that Chaucer reaches outside his primary sources to include these allegorical trees.

Chaucer’s decision to juxtapose these trees can be understood as original authorial invention that appears quite “literary.” While in the last two decades many critics have acknowledged that there are literary moments within the Parson’s Tale, to my knowledge none have examined comprehensively this most aesthetic element—Chaucer’s use of the Tree of Penitence and the Tree of Vices as a structuring device for the entire penitential handbook. Richard Newhauser, who has pioneered much of the work on medieval penitential handbooks and treatises on the virtues and vices, finds “dramatization and rhetorical elaboration” and “vivid imagery” in the Parson’s Tale in comparison to Chaucer’s sources.32 Newhauser remarks that “the clearest example of Chaucer’s attention to such imagery is his addition of the tree of contrition.”33 This alteration, I argue, is essential to the Tale’s highly artistic structure, a construction which allows interplay between the “fructuous” images of the Tree of Penitence, the cross, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and the Tree of Vices.

The important role that organic images play in the Canterbury Tales has not been overlooked. In fact, my thinking about trees in Chaucer’s work has been informed by David

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33 Ibid., 70.
Raybin’s argument that the plant images of the General Prologue and the Parson’s Tale point toward “an inclusive spiritual behavioral model that champions variety.” It is true that these figurations emphasize process rather than closure and stress the simplicity of salvation in comparison to the complexity of sin. However, the Parson’s turn from the pilgrimage motif to the Tree of Penitence moves away from discussions of diversity or variety motivated by the collective endeavor of pilgrimage toward an articulation of the individual and the individual’s evolution. In other words, the organic images invoked by Harry’s word choice and the Parson’s response suggest a redirection of the communal focus on pilgrimage in the General Prologue to the individual process condensed in the Tree of Penitence.

By organizing his penitential handbook around the profoundly individual image of the Tree of Penitence, the Parson narrows his focus from the group to the individual. In contrast to the Tree, a single entity, the way of penitence developed in Chaucer’s source might be shared by a number of pilgrims and divided into distinct stages. The move from public pilgrimage to private confession, indicated in the manifestation of the three parts of penance figured in the tree—contrition, confession, and satisfaction—reminds readers that salvation is an intensely personal, even solitary, process. The Parson’s opening “conjures the variety of human possibilities to assert that penitence alone offers a sure pathway to God,” but it is significant that the end of the Canterbury Tales leaves the reader not with “a variety of human possibilities,” but the sole opportunity of salvation—found in the Tree of Penitence—for each individual. In the relationship of the Tree of Penitence to the Tree of Vices, the Parson’s Tale fashions a model of

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35 Ibid., 42.
religiosity that encourages the individual to evolve by tolerating, or even perhaps exploiting, both the vices that jeopardize his salvation and “every peyne” (X.109) that threatens his joy.

The Tree of Penitence and Tree of Vices interact in a symbiotic relationship in which vice actually encourages the growth of penitence, which in turn gradually suffocates sin. Explaining the connections between several of the trees that appear in the *Tale*, Krista Sue-Lo Twu asserts that by adapting Raymund of Pennafort’s metaphor for penitence from a journey to a tree, Chaucer links the cross with the Tree of Penitence, which provides a path from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil to the Tree of Life.36 Twu demonstrates the advantages the “simple and homely image of a tree” holds for Chaucer’s lay audience.37 The tree image provides a domestic metaphor more easily related to the every day lives of his audience members than a journey, and it portrays penitence as an interdependent and continual process rather than the annual penitential ritual emphasized by the Fourth Lateran Council.38 Twu’s argument, however, does not take into account the much longer section on the Tree of Vices or how the Tree of Penitence relates to the Tree of Vices.

Given the dearth of other medieval texts that bring together the Tree of Penitence and the more familiar Tree of Vices, it becomes apparent that the primary importance of these two trees to the *Parson’s Tale* derives less from their individual incarnations than from their arrangement and relation to each other and to the other elements of the narrative. After the opening lines of the Tale that describe the pilgrimage toward heaven as the “wey [that] is cleped Penitence” (X.81), the Parson positions himself as a “fructuous” narrator when he abruptly moves his discussion to the metaphor of “fruytful penitence” (X.110) found in the new image. His outline

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36 “Chaucer’s Vision of the Tree of Life: Crossing the Road with the Rood in the *Parson’s Tale*,” *Chaucer Review* 39 (2005): 341-378, especially at 373.
37 Ibid., 342.
38 Ibid., 346, 351.
of the Tree of Penitence dictates the rest of his narrative. Like the remainder of the Tale, the Tree of Penitence is divided into three parts: the root of contrition; the trunk, branches, and leaves of confession; and the fruit of satisfaction:

The roote of this tree is Contricioun, that hideth hym in the herte of hym that is verray repentauant, right as the roote of a tree hydeth hym in the erthe. / Of the roote of Contricioun spryngeth a stalke that bereth braunches and leaves of Confessioun, and fruyt of Satisfaccioun. / For which Crist seith in his gospel, ‘Dooth digne fruyt of Penitence’; for by this fruyt may men knowe this tree, and nat by the roote that is hyd in the herte of man, ne by the braunches, ne by the leves of Confessioun. (X.113-15)

This description organizes the remaining sections of the Parson’s penitential manual—including the longer section on the seven deadly sins, rendered as the Tree of Vices. The Tree of Vices in the Tale is a threat to the Tree of Penitence but also necessary to the “braunches and leves of Confessioun” (X. 114). Thus, in response to Host Harry Bailey’s expressed desire for fruitful narrative, Chaucer has the Parson methodically and deliberately replace the incipient metaphor found in Pennaforte. The path to eternal life becomes the Tree of Penitence, which ultimately weakens the power of the Tree of Vices and effectually produces the “fruyt of penaunce” (X.1076) that is seen concretely in Chaucer’s example, the Retraction. Accordingly, Bailey’s instruction for the Parson to be “fructuous” seems appropriate for the end of a pilgrimage with a religious aim, and the Tale reminds its reader of the pilgrimage motif before replacing it with the Tree of Penitence as a more organic metaphor for Christian life.

The Parson’s sudden metaphoric shift to the Tree of Penitence as the agent of salvation transforms the primary journey motif of the Canterbury Tales frame narrative to a more individual and open-ended image that emphasizes enduring personal growth and progress. By framing the Canterbury Tales as a pilgrimage from Southwark to the resting place of Thomas à

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39 Petersen, 9, notes Bonaventure’s De Dieta Salutis, titulus ii, De Poenitentia: “Comparatur autem Penitens Arbori, cuius radix est Contritio; frondes, Confessio; et flores, sancta Devotio; fructus, bona Opera; humor, Gratia diffusio.” [Now the penitent is compared to a tree whose root is contrition, whose leaves are confession, whose blossoms are holy devotion, whose fruit are good works, and whose sap is the overflow of grace.]
Becket at Canterbury, Chaucer explores a cross-section of society through his narrative while considering hierarchical and political structures. Yet, despite Chaucer’s attention to social matters seemingly extraneous to pilgrimage, the spiritual purpose outlined in the General Prologue prepares readers for the religiosity of the Parson’s Tale. As the Canterbury project nears an end, the Prologue’s emphasis on physicality in its descriptions of springtime regeneration as sexual activity wanes, and the shift toward individual spirituality is underlined by Chaucer’s possible placement of the Tale on Good Friday. Moreover, the Parson in his Prologue unambiguously reminds members of the group that their literal pilgrimage is less significant than their spiritual pilgrimage (X.48-51), a point he reiterates at the beginning of the Tale. He promises that many spiritual paths lead to Jesus and heaven, but the way of penitence is a certain path to salvation:

Manye been the weyes espirituels that leden folk to oure Lord Jhesu Crist and to the regne of glorie. / Of whiche weyes ther is a ful noble wey and a ful covenable, which may nat fayle to man ne to womman that thurgh synne hath mysgoon fro the righte wey of Jerusalem celestial; / and this wey is cleped Penitence, of which man sholde gladly herknen and enquere with all his herte . . . (X.79-81)

Although the pilgrimage motif itself organizes the frame narrative and thus would seem to be apposite for the Parson’s discussion of penitence, the metaphor is collective rather than personal. Also, the spiritual project as a pilgrimage or journey has definitive limits rather than open-ended possibilities; that is, its purpose and end result are contrived rather than a natural outgrowth of man’s heart illustrated through the Tree of Penitence. Here Chaucer utilizes a narrative technique similar to that of his early dream-poems in which the “narrative structure of the poems grows organically from the gardens they feature.”


of his allegorical Tree of Penitence, since once he replaces Pennaforte’s journey motif with the
Tree of Penitence, the remainder of the *Tale* follows the organizational structure outlined by the
root, branches, and fruit of the allegorical tree.

Although the allegorical landscape of the Christian interior created in the *Parson’s Tale*
is somewhat dissimilar to the literal, man-made, and “well-ordered outdoor spaces” that “serve
as thresholds into well-ordered narratives,” the image of penitence as a tree, as opposed to a
way, offers the Parson an archetype of patient agency, which can be described as the “routinized
involvement in the fabric of existence.” This type of agency characterizes the slow, methodical
branching out of his *Tale* as well as his paradigm for human behavior. Initially, the Parson
reiterates Chrystostom’s description of penitence: “Penitence *distreyneth a man to accepte
benygnely every peyne that hym is enjoyned*” (X.109). Redefined as a tree, penitence embodies a
resigned acceptance of wrongs, a motif also seen in much earlier texts such as the Old English
poem *Resignation*, where strength is found in the steady growth of spiritual wisdom and patience
developed only through the passage of time. More importantly for this discussion, in contrast to
the militant model offered by Cecilia of the *Second Nun’s Tale*, various characters of the
*Canterbury Tales* illustrate this type of agency. Constance of the *Man of Law’s Tale*, Prudence of
the *Tale of Melibee*, and Griselda of the *Clerk’s Tale* all extend models of behavior in which
patient submission translates to a unique type of power for these women.

Chaucer employs the Tree of Penitence not only as an organizing device for his audience
to remember the necessary parts of penance, but also as a model by which his hearers should live

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43 Owain Jones and Paul Cloke, *Tree Cultures: The Place of Trees and Trees in Their Place* (Oxford: Berg, 2002),
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44 See above, chapter one, page 47-48.
their lives. Whereas a reader consciously might resist emulating characters such as Constance or Griselda, who passively endure heinous wrongs, Chaucer’s audience might more readily accept a tree as a constructive paradigm for the human experience. After all, this apparent passivity—waiting, enduring, submitting, continuing—in plant form reflects the fundamental nature of a tree’s life. Although Raybin does not connect the tree metaphor to this idea, he points out that a “central theme in The Canterbury Tales seems to be that patient endurance in the face of misfortune and evil is conducive and sometimes even necessary to effecting the transition from sin to salvation.”

The suitability of Chaucer’s choice of metaphors is underlined by this overarching theme. That is, although the journey metaphor engaged by the Parson at the opening of his tale positions his listeners on an appropriate religious path, the organic image of the tree more personally engages his listeners with the metaphor as he portrays the penitential narrative as an outgrowth from their hearts.

Chaucer offers a paradigm not only for a narrative of penitence, but also for personal evolution absent in the image of a way found in the Parson’s opening scriptural text, Jeremiah 6:16 (X.77-78), and in Pennaforte. In so doing, he connects the Tree of Penitence to the Tree of Life. He uses the familiar biblical allusion to remind his fourteenth-century readers of their fallen nature and their need for the “right” tree to rectify Adam’s mistake, as well as to offer them a tangible reward to be grasped from the outset. For this reason, following his description of each part of the Tree of Penitence, the Parson invokes the authority of Solomon to connect his image to the Fall of Man: “Penaunce is the tree of lyf to hem that it receyven, and he that holdeth hym

45 Raybin, 35-36.

46 X.78-80. Petersen identifies the parallels in Pennaforte as “viam rectam, necessarium, et infallibilem” and “quae quidem est poenitentia: circa quam videndum” (4).
in verry penitence is blessed, after the sentence of Salomon” (X.127). Penitence becomes a commendable state of being—“holdeth hym in verry penitence”—best embodied through the seemingly passive or static agency of a tree. Essentially, penance replaces the Tree of Life for the Parson’s audience and becomes a gift from God, offering each individual an opportunity to regain the fruits of God’s favor originally lost through Adam and Eve’s disobedience.

Chaucer’s invocation of a tree and its separate parts brings his discussion of penitence closer to his audience than the metaphor invoked in his primary source. Not only does he capitalize on the familiar biblical allusion to the Tree of Life, but he also incorporates an agricultural subtext easily understood in a predominantly rural society. Accordingly, the Parson’s discussion of the roots of the Tree of Penitence emphasizes that penance involves a more permanent personal transformation than that implied by the metaphor of passage or transition from point A to point B. After all, contrition hides “in the herte of hym that is verry repentaunt, right as the roote of a tree hydeth hym in the erthe” (X.111). The state of contrition, therefore, is not an emotion that the sinner can evoke once a year during his or her annual confession, but it is the very core of his spirituality. Like a tree’s root, contrition might be expected to grow steadily if not always at the same rate. British forester H. L. Edlin observes that a tree’s root grows continuously, although in England the roots grow most quickly in the spring and summer seasons. A journey, in contrast, has a definitive starting point and ending point. In other words, the penitent who conceives of the process of salvation as a tree rather than a path would not expect to leave contrition behind as he enters into an act of confession or a stage of

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48 See note 7, above.

satisfaction, although the root of contrition might be expected to grow more rapidly during certain stages of life.

Obviously, then, the origin of penitence—the root—is as vital to the tree’s prosperity as the more visible parts of the plant, not unlike the inward frame of the contrite mind as opposed to satisfactory acts such as pilgrimage. In converting penitence from a journey to a tree, the Parson asks his listeners to amend their understanding of penitence from periodic religious actions required by the church to a perpetual state of spiritual growth—with the understanding that, like a tree, progress may seem stagnant at times or even seem to be permanently halted. This more organic view of penitence offers a merciful, even tolerant acceptance of those who currently are not producing the “fruit of satisfaction”—for the root of contrition may be growing even as the Tree of Vices appears to be overrunning the spiritual landscape.50

Even Chaucer’s medieval reader who observed the processes of nature might obtain a foundational scientific understanding of the more complex botanical operations underlying the metaphor.51 Common sense supports the principle that for a tree’s success, the root must securely attach the trunk to the ground and absorb water and mineral nutrients for the tree. Although the root is not visible above the ground, it performs functions as vital to the success of the plant as the more apparent work of its flowers, fruits, and seeds for propagation. In effect, the Parson calls attention to the root’s stabilizing role when he says that contrition “hideth hym in the herte of hym that is verray repentaunt, right as the roote of a tree hydeth hym in the erthe” (X.113). The implication of this statement is that the branches and leaves of confession and the fruit of satisfaction must be firmly fixed within the ground of the human heart in order to be viable. Also, contrition is not itself apparent to the onlooker, but in Chaucer’s alteration from the

50 See Raybin, 13, for a discussion of Chaucer’s “inclusive, hence tolerant spirituality.”
51 See Edlin, 18-23, for a description of these operations.
original source, it becomes an essential component of penitence: “The parts of the tree are mutually interdependent, whereas Raymund’s days of the journey remain sequential.”52 For instance, common scientific knowledge tells us that leaves create food for the root, which the tree’s vascular tissues transport to the root. The root absorbs water and minerals from the soil and conducts them to the trunk.

Chaucer’s reader, while lacking many of the technical details learned since the fourteenth century, would understand that a root is not self-sufficient. Just as confession and satisfaction are impossible without contrition, so does contrition require confession and satisfaction for its continued existence. In short, the root provides strength and stability for the rest of the plant and conducts the water and minerals essential for the tree’s growth, but it also needs the leaves to generate nutrients through photosynthesis and the stems, branches, and trunk to conduct this food down to the root. Correspondingly, contrition provides durability to the penitential project and ensures continual growth if confession is present.

The root’s environment also plays a significant role in determining the quality of tree that arises—or whether a tree is capable of growing in a particular environment at all. The Parson’s insistence on the role of contrition for profitable penitence entails the interdependence of the various parts of the tree he depicts. It also necessitates the tree’s dependence on the environment in which the root is planted, a detail raised when he highlights contrition’s sheltered position in the human heart. In addition to needing water and minerals from the soil, a root requires air, so the soil surrounding the root must provide appropriate drainage. Just as all of Britain’s common trees will die in waterlogged soil, so will all the Canterbury pilgrims find spiritual death without

52 Twu, 353.
a healthy sense of contrition.\textsuperscript{53} It is appropriate, therefore, that the Parson spend some time methodically enumerating the six factors that are essential to the growth of the metaphorical root of contrition: remembering sin with shame and sorrow, understanding that sin has enslaved one’s body, feeling dread of Doomsday and hell, remembering the good one has not done, recalling the Passion of Christ, and experiencing hope for forgiveness of sin, the gift of grace, and the glory of heaven. Although the penitent can optimize the environment to stimulate the growth of contrition, it is important to note that these six methods are dependent on the individual’s interior life—and therefore more suitable to the tree metaphor—rather than the more external factors that might initiate a pilgrimage or journey.

The Parson’s use of the Tree of Penitence rather than the Way of Penitence for the bulk of the \textit{Tale} limits the scope of the penitential project to those who have undergone internal transformation. At the same time, this alteration expands the \textit{Tale}’s reach beyond those whose social status or occupation would allow for spiritual feats, such as pilgrimage, that might buy favor with the fourteenth-century Church. The original Canterbury project, outlined in the \textit{General Prologue}, appears open to a variety of pilgrims and a cross-section of society from all the estates, but in fact is reserved for those with the resources to take such an excursion. Unlike pilgrimages, which tend to cater to the rising bourgeoisie, the Parson’s Tree of Penitence opens up the possibility of spiritual healing to all individuals, regardless of social status. At the same time, by rooting the Tree of Penitence in the heart of the individual and internalizing the six causes of contrition, the Parson limits spiritual healing to those whose hearts offer an appropriate environment for contrition, and ultimately, confession and satisfaction, to grow. Moreover, since “fruytful penitence” (X.109) ultimately depends on the success of the root of contrition, it

\textsuperscript{53} Edlin, 18.
requires radical personal change—the transformation of one’s heart, the environment in which
the Tree of Penitence is to grow.

The way of penitence to salvation, or rather, the growth of penitence, might seem
impossible to some of the very pilgrims making the Canterbury pilgrimage. However, the
Parson’s treatments of the cross and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in relation to the
allegorical Trees of Penitence and Vices accord both with his expressed desire to instruct and
edify the Canterbury pilgrims (X.38, 48-51) as well as with his notion that spiritual healing is a
gradual process open to even the most sinful members of his audience. For example, he
introduces the cross in the section outlining the six causes of contrition, a deviation from
Pennaforte that “owes a substantial debt in its general design and in specific detail to meditative
literature on the Passion.”54 Most of the causes of contrition, constituting the root’s environment,
specify a particular emotion. In remembering sins, one must feel “greet shame and sorwe for his
gilt” (X.134), “drede” of eternal punishment (X.158), “sorweful remembraunce” of good deeds
left undone (X.231), and “hope of three thynges[:]. . . foryifnesse of synne, and the yifte of grace
wel for to do, and the glorie of hevene” (X.283). The root is grounded in memory and emotion,
and although emotion might be difficult to manufacture, at least one of the six stimuli for
contrition—meditation on Christ’s death—requires only a simple narrative of remembrance.
What is more, nowhere does the Parson specify that all six causes must be present.55

In contrast to such works as The Dream of the Rood where the cross is depicted as a
treow which is itself a sympathetic and paradigmatic agent of reconciliation and spiritual healing,
the Parson takes a literal but emotive approach to the cross. The cross serves as a frame of
reference for the penitent to remember Christ’s passion in graphic detail so as to stimulate the

54 Bestul, 607.
55 For a summary of medieval commentary on the causes of contrition, see Braswell, 33-34.
root of contrition. The Parson lists some “of the travailes that oure Lord Crist / suffred” (X.256) in increasingly emotive rhetoric such as “the wo and the shame and the filthe that men seyden to hym, of the foule spittyng that men spitte in his face, of the buffettes that men yaven hym” (X.258). The text invites its reader to remember the cross simply as it outlines this cause of contrition: “of the nayles with whiche he was nayled to the croys, and of al the remenant of his passioun that he suffred for my synnes, and no thyng for his gilt” (X.259). The memory of the “croys” provokes intellectual contemplation (X.260) of how sin creates disorder (X.262). Intellectual scrutiny gives way to pathos, as seen in the Parson’s description of Christ’s suffering in which “he hadde be bitraysed of his disciple, and distreyned and bounde, so that his blood brast out at every nayl of his handes” (X.269) and “they spetten in his visage” (X.270). This cycle, from remembrance to intellectual understanding to pathos, is repeated again within the Parson’s fifth cause of contrition, starting with a second meditation on the cross: “And this suffred oure Lord Jhesu Crist for man upon the croys where as ther was no part of his body free withouten greet peyne and bitter passioun” (X.272). In addition to using emotive language, the Parson attempts to elicit a response from his hearers by using anaphora—he repeats “this suffred oure Lord Jhesu Crist for man” three times—and polysyndeton, which burdens his hearers with the weight of the listing of all that Christ does suffer for man. What follows this eloquent stylizing is a moderately detached reflection on human sin as the reason for such suffering, which again incites emotional rhetoric—“vileynsly bispet” (X.279), for instance—and culminates with a third allusion to the cross: “Thanne was he scourged, that no thyng hadde agilt; and finally, thanne was he crucified and slayn” (X.280). The cross, then, becomes in the Parson’s Tale an emblem of Christ’s innocent suffering. The narrative it helps construct is the
most unproblematic and achievable cause of contrition for those sinners who might not experience the genuine shame, sorrow, dread, or hope called for by the other causes of contrition.

As such, despite the text’s literal presentation of the cross as a reminder of Christ’s passion and the sinner’s responsibility (X.281-82), the Parson’s cross also serves a symbolic purpose for his presentation of the Tree of Penitence. The root of contrition potentially grows from memories associated with the cross, the most certain cause of contrition. The cross, as the most assured cause of the root of contrition, also becomes a starting point for the Tree of Penitence. Agricultural techniques help explain this curious metaphor, the root of the Tree of Penitence growing out of the cross, or rood tree. In the Middle Ages, Englishmen replaced most British trees either through coppicing and suckering, which stimulate the root system, or from seed, which generates new roots. Coppicing, the cutting of wooded areas on a regular cycle of several years, was well established by 1086.56 For broadleaved trees, which regenerate after felling, coppicing was the most common method of woodland management.57 This bit of information enhances the Parson’s metaphorical arrangement of the cross in connection with the Tree of Penitence, with either of the two most common agricultural methods explaining the growth of the root of contrition from the cross. Christ, associated with the rood tree, is cut down in order to encourage new growth, as with coppicing. Alternatively, the rood tree, representing the life of Christ including his birth, death, and rebirth, is the seed that generates human penance. The two possibilities for stimulating the growth of the Tree of Penitence add to the overall impression the text gives that salvation, at least in the Parson’s view, can include even the most unsavory of characters found in the Canterbury Tale project.

Before analyzing how the Parson opposes the two allegorical trees in order to magnify the role of penitence and to acknowledge but minimize that of the Tree of Vices, it first is necessary to examine the second biblical tree that the Parson uses in his penitential, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Like the cross, the biblical Tree of Knowledge explains the origin of an allegorical tree, the Tree of Vices in this case, and contrasts neatly with the cross via the old Adam/new Adam motif that arises in so much of the iconography of the Tree of Virtues and Tree of Vices.\textsuperscript{58} Where the cross, as an origin point for the root of contrition and the Tree of Penitence, generates an affective response, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil requires an intellectual reaction. Hence, the Parson introduces the biblical Tree of Knowledge in the section outlining “The seconde partie of Penitence” (X.316), or confession, which requires an academic understanding of sin and its origin for proper development. The Parson emphasizes the role of understanding required by each member of his audience: “First shaltow understande that Confessioun is verray shewing of synnes to the preest” (X.318). Not only must an individual appreciate what confession is, he must understand its origin: “it is necessarie to understande whennes that synnes \textit{springen}, and how they \textit{encreessen}, and whiche they been” (X.321). This sentence is sufficient both to introduce the biblical and allegorical tree that follow as well as to buttress the horticultural narrative that Chaucer is shaping. The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil explains the origin of sin, while the Tree of Vices helps to explain “whiche they been.”\textsuperscript{59}

As with his depiction of the cross, the Parson presents a literal scriptural narrative of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, an objective and factual move that helps authenticate and explain the origin of the allegorical trees of the \textit{Tale}. Both venial and deadly sins appear to spring from Adam, who is associated with “the tree that is in the myddel of Paradys” (X.327).

\textsuperscript{58} See Katzenellenbogen, 67; O’Reilly, 326-27, 332.
\textsuperscript{59} For Chaucer’s placement of the seven deadly sins, see Bloomfield, 185, 192.
Sin itself, of which the Tree of Vices is a subdivision, actively grows and increases. The “spryngynge of synnes” (X.322) stems from Adam, and the “norissynge of synne” (X.338, 350) by concupiscence allows sin to “wexeth or encreaseth in man” (X.350). Sin works by “moevynge or stirynge” (X.355), and sins “multiplie in a man” (X.365). Conversely, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is only important as it relates to Adam’s actions, just as the cross for the Parson is only important in relation to Christ and Christ’s passion. Beginning with “th’estaat of innocence” (X.325) and Adam and Eve’s nakedness, the excerpt selected by the Parson details the temptation and fall and ends with the covering of their nakedness “to hidden hire members” (X.330). The Parson thus uses Genesis 2:25-3:7 to explain how “synne entred into this world” (X.323) and to outline the progression of sin. Each step of this progression uses an element of the biblical narrative. The serpent represents the first step, the “suggestion of the feend” (X.331); Eve corresponds to the second step, “the delit of the flesh”; and Adam symbolizes the third, “the consentynge of resoun.” Although the Parson uses conventional exegesis derived from Augustine to explain the significance of the Fall, he ignores Augustine’s teachings on the Tree itself and passes up the opportunity to use the biblical tree for exegetical purpose. It holds none of the negative agency seen in the Junius 11 manuscript. It is merely an attractive but forbidden object: “good to feedyng, and fair to the eyen, and delitable to the sighte” (X.329), the “beautee of the fruyt” (X.332) good both to see and to taste. In contrast to a work like Genesis B, the literal presentation of the Tree of Knowledge and the Parson’s insistence on Adam rather than the biblical tree as the origin of sin is in keeping with the Parson’s positive use of nature and natural processes to explain the path to salvation. The biblical tree explains original sin and the reason all men are sinners in need of penitence, but it itself takes no blame for the Fall of Man in the

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60 See chapter two above, pages 58-60.
Parson’s Tale, allowing the Parson to place the burden of guilt and the need for remorse back on his individual listeners.

In case his fellow pilgrims are not yet convinced of their need for genuine penitence, the Parson at this point turns to his discussion of the Tree of Vices, its extensive series of branches and twigs embracing most if not all human individuals.61 The Parson uses this section to advance the penitential project by proposing that most individuals are guilty not only of venial sins, but also of deadly sins. He has already explained that sin cannot be eliminated—“noon ethely man may eschue alle venial synnes” (X.381). The venial sins may not be rooted out, but rather their growth deterred and their strength sapped: “. . . yet may he refreyne hym by the brennynge love that he hath to oure Lord Jhesu Crist, and by preyeres and confessioun and othere goode werkes, so that it shal but litel greve” (X.381). For this reason, Chaucer introduces the Tree of Vices as part of his discussion on confession, or the branches and leaves of the Tree of Penitence, the Parson rather abruptly announcing that he will discuss the “sevene deedly synnes” (X.387). The Tree of Vices follows the familiar pattern. Its root is pride, six branches spring from the root, and each branch has its own series of twigs and branches.

Of the roote of thise sevene synnes, thanne, is Pride the general roote of alle harmes. For of this roote spryngen certein braunches, as Ire, Envye, Accidie or Slewthe, Avarice or Covetise (to commune understondynge), Glotonye, and Lecherye. / And everich of thise chief synnes hath his braunches and his twigges, as shal be declared in hire chapitres folwynge. / And thogh so be that no man kan outerly telle the nombre of the twigges and of the harmes that cometh of Pride, yet wol I shewe a partie of hem, as ye shul understonde. (X.388-90)

What follows is the lengthy discussion comprising the bulk of the Tale that is ultimately indebted to Peraldus. The Parson speaks on of each of the deadly sins, its subsidiaries, and its remedy, or

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61 This impression has led several critics to read all the Tales in terms of the seven deadly sins. For a review of this critical strain, see Braswell, 101-103.
opposing virtue, before returning to conclude his discussion of the Tree of Penitence with some final comments on confession and finally to close rapidly with the fruit of satisfaction.

Although the Tree of Vices’ basic structure is consistent with fourteenth-century depictions, its extensive and disordered tangle of branches and twigs associates almost every individual with the Tree and threatens to overrun the penitential project. The branches of the Tree of Vices vary widely in the number of twigs, contrasting with the standard iconography that places great importance on the number seven, seven branches each holding seven leaves, or fruits, to depict the subsidiaries of each vice. For example, a mid twelfth-century image of the Tree of Vices in the Arundel 44 Speculum virginum, while emphasizing the detrimental effects of the vices with the downward wilt of the leaves, “venomous serpents,” and “dragonish beasts,” limits the subsidiaries to seven on each branch. A much later incarnation of the Arbor vitiorum in the early fourteenth-century English De Lisle Psalter depicts each of the seven vices as a fruit surrounded by its seven subsidiaries. The uniformity of the arrangement, from the script, to the circular fruit, to the appearance of the branches, and the overall graceful, perfect symmetry make this illustration seem more a scholastic, intellectual, and artistic rendition than a visual representation of something that would threaten the reader’s salvation.

In contrast to the threatening image created by the textual version of the Tree of Vices found in the Parson’s Tale, these organized diagrams, with their precise symmetry and simple visual appeal, do little to actually inspire confession. In contrast, the Parson from the outset emphasizes Pride’s scope: “And thogh so be that no man kan outrely telle the nombre of the

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62 O’Reilly, 366.

63 For an overview of the Arundel 44 Speculum virginum and a description of its illustration of the Tree of Vices, see Arthur Watson, “The Speculum Virginum with Special Reference to the Tree of Jesse,” Speculum 3 (1928): 445-69, especially at 449.

64 The Psalter of Robert De Lisle in the British Library, 48-49. See note 26 above.
twigges and of the harmes that cometh of Pride, yet wol I shewe a partie of hem, as ye shul understonde” (X.390). Despite his observation that it is impossible to count the number of twigs stemming from Pride, the Parson proceeds to list sixteen subsidiaries—rather than the more traditional seven of both textual and iconographic tradition—followed with the caveat “and many another twig that I kan nat declare” (X.391).65 Katherine Little has demonstrated that in this section of the Tale, the Parson “seems so caught up in taxonomizing that there is no space for relating the sins as a theoretical concept to the person sinning . . . . [T]he interest has shifted from making the listener aware of how he might understand his sin to the overwhelming presence of his sin.”66 This tendency “raises questions about the limits of personal reform through penitential language,”67 which may well be a crucial way in which Chaucer’s treatment differs from clerical views of penitence. In fact, the disorganized and at times excessive listing is part of the effectiveness of this staging of the Tree of Vices because in the Parson’s view, personal reform depends not so much on the individual’s ability to eliminate sin but rather on the Tree of Penitence.

The Parson’s emphasis on the chaotic and vast nature of the Tree of Vices forces his listeners to revisit penitence as the means to personal reform. His catalogue is designed to remind the members of his audience that they are sinners. The disordered and lengthy list also demonstrates the impossibility of confessing each sin with its numerous subsidiaries let alone replacing each offense with its opposing virtue. While the Parson emphasizes the importance of confessing these sins, he looks to the Tree of Penitence—rather than man’s ability to articulate fully his sins in confession—for salvation. A much earlier treatment of the vices, *Vices and*

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65 For the conventional nature of the sevenfold division, see Petersen, 36, and Pfander, 256.
66 Little, 251.
67 Ibid., 250.
Virtues (1200), effectively demonstrates this distinction in a vernacular allegorical dialogue between the soul and reason. In contrast to the Parson’s discussion, this rendering of sin is deeply personal in its incorporation of confessional practices, particularly in its frequent personal expressions of compunction. Since the beginning of the manuscript is missing, it is impossible to understand completely the dialogue’s organization of the vices. Nonetheless, it is safe to say that the author seems not to have in mind a subsidiary system for the capital sins. The author uses a modified Cassianic list ending with superbia, or modinesse, which he calls the anginn of alle sennes (“beginning of all sins,” 5.8). However, in the absence of an ordered subsidiary system by which to insert sins other than the capital vices, the author tacks on a brief description of disobedience, swearing oaths, lying, backbiting, deceit, cursing, impatience, self-will, and unrighteousness. These apparently are sins through which ic habbe muchel misdon (“I have done much wrong,” 7.15). It appears that the author uses the capital sins as a program by which to confess his sins and follows up with a listing of those other vices that trouble him, a model that the laity might reasonably follow. In contrast, the Parson’s extensive taxonomy for the Tree of Vices offers a poor model for oral confession.

A vernacular text contemporary with Chaucer’s work, the fourteenth-century Midland English translation of Friar Laurent’s Somme le roi (literally, “the king’s sum”) known as The Book of Vices and Virtues offers an extensive taxonomy for the Tree of Vices more reminiscent of the Parson’s. However, the importance The Book of Vices and Virtues places on a highly

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69 See, as one of many examples, page 15, lines 25-26: “Wa me ḣas! Mea culpa!” Hereafter cited parenthetically by page and line number.
structured framework implies at least the possibility of priests effectively using the structure to elicit a complete confession. Although this text depicts the capital sins as the seven heads of the beast in Revelation, the first sin of pride is organized with branches in language similar to the Parson’s Tale:

This synne is devised and y-sprad in so many maneres and so fele parties that unnethe may any man noumbre hem. But natheles ther beth sevene principal braunches, that beth in sevene maneres y-schewed, that cometh out of a wikkid roote.\(^{70}\)

While the author, like Chaucer, asserts that no person can number the offshoots from pride, he proceeds nonetheless to organize these subsidiaries (branches) and their offshoots (twigs). This extensive numbering and listing continues in organized fashion throughout the Book of Vices and Virtues, much as if its author has seen a detailed diagram of the Tree of Vices and is now enumerating its characteristics. Conversely, the Parson’s Tale necessitates a measure of irregularity in the listing of the subsidiaries as it reflects the chaotic nature of sin and the disorder it creates in the life of the individual.

Through these changes to the Tree of Vices, Chaucer attempts to create in the individual an overwhelming sense of contrition and an urgent need for confession, whereas the original goal of the diagram is didactic, a rather academic explanation of the sinner’s active path to reform. Explaining the theological purposes of the diagram, Jennifer O’Reilly observes that the tree image offers “a conveniently shaped framework on which to hang complex classifications and subtle cross-references within those systems with the utmost clarity.”\(^{71}\) Moreover, “[o]nly an image of organic growth could adequately represent the moral life of man; the Tree shows that


\(^{71}\) O’Reilly, 329.
the Virtues or the Vices are inherently related to each other, that a sinful act may well stem from
several sins, that an individual sin can have many offshoots.”72 These advantages of the tree
metaphor hold true for the Parson’s Tale, although Chaucer has radically altered what O’Reilly,
speaking of the twelfth-century Salzburg diagram, calls “the logical conclusion” of the
interrelatedness of the tree’s branches and offshoots, the need to chop down and ultimately
uproot the entire Tree of Vices and plant the Tree of Virtue in its place. O’Reilly’s conclusion
that the diagram calls for the felling of the Tree of Vices is supported by the Arbor mala
miniature in the Liber floridus (c. 1120), which features two axes at its root.73 The idea that vices
must be uprooted before virtues can be planted also is explicitly stated by Othlo of St. Emmeran
(c. 1013-72) and expresses “the commonplace practical thought of Gregory and Cassian.”74 It is
found in such texts as A Myrour to Lewde Men and Wymmen, a vernacular prose treatise of about
1400 that retains Friar Laurent’s tree imagery for the vices and virtues.75 Yet Chaucer’s
presentation of the Tree of Vices demands no such action.

Like most representations, the Tree of Vices in the Parson’s Tale springs from the root of
pride and contains branches listing the vices, but the action required by the reader in response to
the Tree is radically different. In contrast to Peraldus, whose Summa vitiorum is distinct from the
Summa virtutum,76 each vice is followed with its remedium, or opposing virtue, thereby posing
the possibility that each vice in fact can be addressed independently. While the virtues are

72 Ibid., 330.
73 Ibid., 335.
74 Wenzel, Summa Virtutum, 7. For the martial terms with which Gregory conceives of these sins, see Morals on the
Book of Job by S. Gregory the Great, vol. 3, pt. 2 of A Library of the Fathers of the Catholic Church Anterior to the
Division of East and West (Oxford: John Parker, 1844), 489.
75 A Myrour to Lewde Men and Wymmen: A Prose Version of the Speculum Vitae, Ed. from B.L. MS Harley 45,
76 Wenzel, “Explanatory Notes,” in Riverside Chaucer, 956. For the lack of an intermediate French or Latin source
placing each virtue after its corresponding vice, see Wenzel, “The Source of Chaucer’s Seven Deadly Sins,” Traditio
identified by the Parson, they generally do not enter into a combative relationship with their opposed vices. The Parson rather advocates intellectual understanding of the vices and their remedies, and through education, the vices appear to become irrelevant. After a lengthy examination of pride, for example, the Parson concludes that since his listeners now understand the nature of the vice, including its varieties and its origins, they must now learn about its remedy, humility or meekness.

Now sith that so is that ye han understonde what is Pride, and whiche been the speces of it, and whennes Pride sourdeth and spryngeth, now shul ye understonde which is the remedie agayns the synne of Pride; and that is humylitee, or mekenesse. (X.475-76)

What follows is an academic definition of humility (X.477), the three “maneres” of humility (X.478), and the four parts of each of the three types (X.479-483). The scholastic outline ends rather abruptly with “Certein, this is a greet werk of humylitee” (X.483), leaving the reader to wonder if the Parson means that humility’s “greet werk” is in causing pride to disappear.

In choosing not to include the Tree of Virtues, a logical addition considering Trees of Vices and Virtues are commonly juxtaposed, but rather placing each of Peraldus’s remedium after its apposite vice, the Parson suggests that his listener can treat each vice as needed by applying the appropriate remedy to each branch. If the root of superbia requires the intellectual comprehension of its treatment, humility, the branch of the “foule synne of Envye” involves both understanding and more aggressive pruning, perhaps particularly because its origin becomes complicated—it arises from the two species of malice—and its sins can arise from avarice, pride, or ire. Effectively using love to treat Envy requires comprehension, as the Parson notes in two instances: “thou shalt understonde the name of thy brother” (X.516); and “Understoond eek that in the name of neighebor is comprehended his enemy” (X. 521). This second time, however, the

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77 According to Wenzel’s list of parallels to the ParsT in Summa Virtutum, 13, no parallel exists for line 475, which recalls the allegorical Tree of Vices. However, line 476 contains the parallel: “Et primo de humilitee quia ipsa est remedium superbie.” [And first concerning humility because it is the remedy to pride.]
Parson characterizes the vice as a poisonous branch that must be treated by the medicine of love—as if it is actually more insidious than Pride, the first sin discussed. In the second to last sentence of the section, the Parson affirms: “Certes, thanne is love the medicine that casteth out the venym of Envye fro mannes herte” (X.531). Although the Parson lists meekness as the remedy for Ire (X.654), which like Envy can grow from multiple branches, he also offers the remedy of patience, an academic listing of four “manere of grevances in outward thynges, agayns the which foure he moot have foure manere of paciences” (X.662), and a digression on how obedience comes from patience. The multiple remedies for Ire provide the sinner with a variety of options with which to eliminate this vice.

Despite this hopeful message, the Parson’s discussion of avarice and lechery reminds the sinner that a wholesale elimination of the Tree of Vices is impossible. Complicating the tree image by recalling Paul’s words from I Timothy 6, “the roote of alle harmes is Coveitise” (X.739), the Parson emphasizes that Avarice can only be relieved through mercy and pity. Similarly, lechery’s remedies, chastity and continence, serve to restrain rather than to eliminate:

That restreyneth all the desordeynee moevynges that comen of flesshly talentes. / And evere the gretter merite shal he han that moost restreyneth the wikkede eschawfynges of the [ardour] of this synne. (X.915-16)

As an afterthought, though, the Parson tacks on two more remedies: “withdrawen swiche thynges as yeve occasion to thilke vileynye, as ese, etynge, and drynkynge” (X.951) and “eschue the compaignye of hem by whiche he douteth to be tempted” (X.953). As seen with the sin of ire, the multiple remedies offer hope at the same time the Parson reminds the sinner that he will never wholly eliminate avarice or lechery.

*The Book of Vices and Virtues* likewise emphasizes the roles of intellectual knowledge, confession, and repentance in addressing the vices, but the author’s opposition of the Tree of
Vices with the Tree of Virtues implies a need for a total elimination of the vices through study, confession, penance, and prayer. At the end of the passage, he exhorts his reader:

Here endeth the sevene dedly synnes and alle here braunches; and who-so wolde wel studie in this boke, it mygt profiten hym, and he mygt lerne and rekene alle manere of synnes and to schryve hym wel, for ther may no man schryve hym wel ne kepe hym from synne but he knowe hem. Now schal he that redeth in this boke ententifly, loke gif he be gilty of any of thes synnes, and gif he be gilty, repente hym and schryve hym and kepe hym to his power from the othere that he is not gilty of, and biseke mekely Ilhesu Christ that he kepe hym fro alle tho and othere; and so mote he kepe us alle, amen. (68.8-19)

The anonymous author is more authorititative than Chaucer is in the analogue. Where the Parson tells us “as [he] kan” of “the sevene deedly synnes, and somme of hire braunches and hire remedies,” the Book of Vices and Virtues asserts that first, it has outlined all the branches of the deadly sins, and second, that intent study of its content will profit the reader. The Parson, by contrast, only hopes that his treatise will “touch” his readers (X.957). His humble tone softens the severity of his message—that the broad reach of the Tree of Vices extends to everyone, including the Parson himself.

Where Chaucer answers the vices with the Tree of Penitence, the author of the Book of Vices and Virtues uses an allegory both organic and militant in which the virtues triumph over the vices in a metaphorical garden. After its discussion of the deadly sins and the virtues, the text concludes the section on the virtues by likening “a good man and a good womman to a fair garden” (92.34-35) of which God is “the grete gardener” (93.36). In this garden stands the beautiful Tree of Life (93.30-36) and the Tree of Virtue, which appears at one point as seven trees of virtue:

In the schadewe of this tree [Tree of Life] wexen and burioneth and bereth fruygt the trees of vertue, that God the fadre, that is the grete gardyner, sett in this gardyne, and gyveth moysture and waterynge of the welle of grace, and maketh it wexe grene and burione and profiten, and kepeth it alwey a-lyve and fresch. (95.36-96.1-5)
The author continues to discuss the well of grace and its seven streams and the seven petitions starting with the Pater Noster, not without reminding us, though, of the seven deadly sins: “And after of the sevene vertues that ben ageyne the sevene dedly synnes, that we have spoke of to-fore” (96.2-4). This psychomachian imagery of the conflict of the vices and virtues is reinforced in the author’s description of the seven spiritual gifts:

Now go we ageyn to oure matere and biseche we with alle oure hertes thilke Holy Gost that techth the hertes that he be oure attorney and teche us and schewe us how he, bi the sevene giftes, doth away and destroith the sevene dedly synnes and setteth in the herte and noresscheth the sevene vertues. (125.30-35)

Not only do these seven gifts encourage the growth of the virtues, they also eliminate the seven vices. An example of the way these gifts work to destroy the deadly sins can be found in the author’s discussion of the gift of dread. Dread sets the root of humility and its four branches in man’s heart: “These foure thougtes destroien the foure braunches of pride that wexen out of the foure rotes that ben in the gardyn of a mannes herte” (128.30-31). This rhetoric of conflict continues in the author’s most clearly articulated delineation of the Tree of Virtues:

The braunches of this tree ben the sevene principal vertues that answeren to the sevene vices, as doth meknesse agens pride, love agense envye, debonerte agens felonye, prowesse agens slowthe, largesse agens covetise, chastite agens lecherie, sobernesse agens glotonie. (159.1-6)

This depiction contrasts with that of the Parson though, who instead of opposing the Tree of Vices with the Tree of Virtues, responds with the Tree of Penitence. The Parson thereby reinforces the suggestion that to eliminate the vices completely and counter them with the Tree of Virtue is impossible.

In his presentation of the virtues, the Parson eschews the opposition of the chief sins with the chief virtues, the traditional way of presenting virtues and vices from Prudentius’s late fourth-century Psychomachia onward. The Parson’s rhetoric portrays the remedies restraining
the vices (Gluttony and Lechery), relieving Avarice (but apparently, not curing it), medicating Envy, and causing Pride to become a non-issue. Only Sloth, and perhaps Envy, to some degree, retain the battle imagery of the Psychomachian conflict. Each branch is addressed with a different method, allowing the sinner to address each vice individually. Through the progression of description, however, the Tree of Vices itself almost disappears as the Parson gradually abandons horticultural rhetoric. Although the opening description of the Tree of Vices emphasizes the organic metaphor, the references to seed, roots, branches, fruit, and other arboreal diction largely disappear after the discussion of Pride, Envy, Ire and Sloth. The Parson returns suddenly to the image, however, as he sums up this portion of the *Tale*:

Now after that I have declared yow, as I kan, the seveyn deadly synnes, and somme of hire braunches and hire remedies, soothly, if I koude, I wolde telle yow the ten commandmentz. / But so heigh a doctrine I lete to divines. (X.956-57)

The brief reference to the branches of the Tree of Vices signals the Parson’s transition to the branches and leaves of confession. The sudden return to the Tree of Penitence suggests that having been stimulated by the sinful environment created by the Tree of Vices, the Tree of Penitence has gained power enough to act “agayns thise wikkede giltes” (X.111). That is, the strength of the metaphor is exhausted in its initial descriptions, and the Tree of Penitence is now prepared to stand “agayns thise wikkede giltes” (X.110).

Two significant facts related to British trees seem to have been unnoticed in previous critical analyses of organic imagery in Chaucer’s oeuvre and yet impact the way in which the Parson intends his listeners to manage sin. First, British trees are not easily killed. Second, most British trees do not thrive under shade. From a medieval British horticultural perspective, eliminating any tree would entail immense personal exertion. At the time, the primary tools used
were “axe, fire, and browsing animals.”

Not only was tree removal more difficult before the modern innovations of chemicals or machinery, native British species are particularly difficult to eliminate because they coppice or sucker when felled and are hard to burn. Oliver Rackham observes that “the most economical way of dealing with a forest that did not contain too many big trees would be by some combination of felling, burning, and browsing.” Of course, the most efficient way—in relation to conserving human energy—would be to enlist nature in the process of woodland management.

In eschewing the tradition that the Tree of Vices must be felled or uprooted by the sinner in order to cultivate the Tree of Virtues, the Parson eases the burden on the penitent so he might better concentrate on what he perceives to be the most critical aspect of Christianity, namely, the elements of penitence. Again, common horticultural knowledge displays how in the Parson’s Tale, eliminating the Tree of Vices becomes a natural process rather than a strenuous exertion on the part of the sinner. The second common fact of medieval British woodland management, alluded to earlier, is that British trees tend to need plenty of light for survival. Because of this, trees in Britain “will not grow up underneath bigger trees of the same species, but only in natural or artificial clearings, or sometimes under the lighter shade of other tree species.” Appropriate to this reality of British horticulture, the Parson finds that felling the Tree of Vices is a less efficient way of dealing with it permanently—when, in fact, it can be used to stimulate the growth of the Tree of Penitence until its nursling overshadows it.

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78 Rackham, 47.
79 Ibid.
80 See page 130, above.
81 Rackham, 20.
The relationship of the Tree of Vices to the Tree of Penitence parallels two of the most common native English trees: oak and beech. Chaucer did not necessarily have these specific species in mind as a metaphor for the Tree of Vices when he composed the *Parson’s Tale*. It is probable, however, that he understood the environmental conditions in which a common native light-demander—particularly those trees holding great economic value as timber—could be grown, as well as the conditions, under such a tree as the beech, in which light-demanding trees would fail. H. L. Edlin explains that light-demanding trees, generally also “pioneers,” must be “grown in the open, away from any shade cast by others.”82 An example of such a tree is the oak, a “major timber producer” with wood “of strength and durability” that currently constitutes “about one-third of all the trees and woods in Britain.”83 Quite the opposite to the oak are the “shade-bearers” or “successors,” which grow much better early on in the shelter of other trees. Foresters know that these trees, like the beech, will do best using “such methods as nursing, underplanting or interplanting, or retaining suitable shelter where old woods are felled.”84 Norman Hickin observes that the beech is often planted among taller oaks, which in time it surpasses only to kill by “its own dense foliage.”85 Because the beech is “shade-resistant,” it will grow slowly under the light-demanding oak.86 Young beech trees need shelter and semi-shade to protect from frost or drought, while few other varieties survive alongside the beech because of its rapid growth and heavy shade.87 Viewing the Tree of Penitence as a shade-bearing species of tree like the beech helps explain its relationship to the Tree of Vices.

82 Edlin, 113.
83 Ibid., 123.
84 Ibid., 113.
86 Rackham, 20.
87 Edlin, 125.
The Parson’s allegorical trees actually have a symbiotic and cyclical relationship in which the positive, seemingly healthy environment of the Tree of Penitence encourages the growth of the vices. Paradoxically, the growth of the vices promotes penitence, which in turn eventually suppresses vice and culminates in the seed of grace. In his discussion of pride’s origin (and hence, the Tree of Vices), the Parson chooses language that will remind his audience of the root of contrition (and hence, the Tree of Penitence). With both trees, Chaucer begins with an identification of the “roote” not in his immediate sources and follows by describing the way the branches “spryng” from this root before naming the branches. In describing the Tree of Vices, however, he tangles the reader in these branches up front rather than quickly moving the listener to the reward of penitence (the “seed of grace”) as he does in his description of the Tree of Penitence:

Of the roote of thise sevene synnes, thanne, is Pride the general roote of alle harmes. For of this roote spryngen certein braunches, as Ire, Envye, Accidie or Slewthe, Avarice or Coveitise (to commune understondynge), Glotonye, and Lecherye. / And everich of thise chief synnes hath his braunches and his twigges, as shal be declared in hire chapitires followynge. (X.388-89)

After outlining the organization of the Tree of Vices and showing “a partie” of the “twigges and of the harmes that cometh of Pride” (X.390)—for Pride apparently is a branch of the tree as well as the “general roote” (X.388)—the Parson backtracks to explain the two types of pride: that which manifests itself externally versus pride “withinne the herte of man” (X.409). More importantly, he describes the source of pride, “whereof that Pride sourdeth and spryngeth” (X.450). In contrast to the rather dreary environment required to stimulate the root of contrition—the memory of personal sin and Christ’s death, for example—pride originates in the Boethian “goodes” of nature, fortune, and grace. The structure of the penitential suggests that the

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88 For an explanation of pride’s significance to confession, see Braswell, 38-40.
most immoral sinner is also the most likely to cultivate the Tree of Penance. Great gifts, including such beneficial “goodes of nature of the soule” such as “good wit, sharp understandynge, subtil engyn, vertu natureel, good memorie” (X.452), provide the environment in which the root of pride—and therefore, the Tree of Vices, will flourish. In turn, the vices trigger at least two of the causes for contrition.

Ironic as it may seem, for the Parson penitence actually makes use of sin in order to grow up, for according to the Tale’s structure, the Tree of Vices acts as a nurse tree until its nursling overtakes it. The first two of the six causes of contrition involve sin: “First, a man shal remembre hym of his synnes” (X.133). Although there is no explicit mention of the seven deadly sins, the scriptural passages that the Parson recalls at this stage of his discussion remind his audience that sin is itself deadly: “for youre synne ye have been waxen thral, and foul, and membres of the feend, hate of aungels, sclaundre of hooly chirche, and foode of the false serpent, perpetueel matere of the fir of helle” (X.137). By listing the remembrance of sin as the first cause of contrition, the Parson implies that the Tree of Penitence can never take root without the presence of sin—and, of course, the sorrowful remembrance of it. The Tree of Vices, with its extensive series of branches and twigs, may seem to have invaded every aspect of the sinner’s life—but the shade it provides can motivate the second cause of contrition. Sin’s bondage, the Parson asserts, leads to “desdeyn of synne” (X.142) and shame. The Tree of Vices thus is to be used, like the oak nurslings of British arboriculture, to cultivate the root of penance in the individual’s heart.

In addition to describing a process of penitence, and ultimately salvation, that models organic process, the Parson uses his allegorical trees to explain his notion of the ideal narrative as sincere, recurrent, and open-ended. Redirecting his audience’s attention to the question of narrative, the Parson instructs his audience members to be completely honest and candid in their
confessions, confessing their sins verbally in order to feel the shame that is the natural consequence of sin. For the love of Christ and the health of his soul, each individual should confess his sins often to a priest. Confessing a sin more than once is commendable and even personally advantageous because thoughtful confession will help him renew his soul.

Thou ne shalt nat eek make no lesynges in thy confessioun, for humylitee, peraventure, to seyn that thou hast doon synnes of which thou were nevere gilty . . . Thou most eek shewe thy synne by thyn owene propre mouth, but thou be woxe dowmb, and nat by no lettre; for thou that hast doon the synne, thou shalt have the shame therfore. / Thow shalt nat eek peyne thy confessioun by faire subtile wordes, to covere the moore thy synne; for thanne bigilestow thyself; and nat the preest. Thow most tellen it platly, be it nevere so foul ne so horrible. / Thow shalt eek shryve thee to a preest that is discreet to conseille thee; and eek thou shat nat shryve thee for veyne glorie, ne for hpocrisye, ne for no cause but oonly for the doute of Jhesu Crist and the heele of thy soule. / Thow shalt eek renne to the preest sodeynly to tellen hym lightly thy synne, as whoso telleth a jape or a tale, but avysely and with greet devocioun. / And generelly, shryve thee ofte. If thou ofte falle, ofte thou arise by confessioun. / And though thou shryve thee after than ones of synne of which thou hast be shryven, it is the moore merite. And, as seith Seint Augustyn, thow shalt have the moore lightly relessyng and grace of God, both of synne and of peyne. / And certes, oones a yeere atte leeste wey it is lawful for to been housled, for certes, oones a yeere all thynges renovelle. (X.1019-27)

Of course, church law dictated yearly confession, but the Parson’s rationale, that all things renew themselves once a year, articulates his belief that the narrative of confession has the express purpose of renewal and restoration. This narrative might branch out in different ways each year depending on the year’s circumstances—and thus, is open-ended but ultimately bears the same fruit (X.1026). Narrative, then, becomes a natural cyclical process that expressed through the horticultural relationship between the allegorical Tree of Penitence and Tree of Vices. The Tree of Penitence acts as the agent that constrains the individual to accept suffering, that works quietly and gradually to suppress sin, that causes new life to spring forth, and that blesses those who cultivate it. The individual himself appears to be responsible for the root (contrition), and the growth of contrition and confession actually is encouraged by the Tree of Penitence’s “nurse tree,” the Tree of Vices. The young “shade-bearing” Tree of Penitence actually thrives in the
presence of this shelter, stimulating the growth of the branches of confession. As the Tree of Penitence flourishes in the shade and eventually surpasses its “sheltering nurse” in height, it in due course creates an environment in which the “light-demanding” Tree of Vices cannot thrive. The cycle is completed with the fruits of satisfaction, alms and bodily pain, which become the physical evidence of the Tree of Penitence’s success. The “fruyt of penaunce” (X.1076) is the believer’s reward:

Thanne shal men understonde what is the fruyt of penaunce; and, after the word of Jhesu Crist, it is the endeelis blisse of hevene, / ther joye hath no contrarioustee of wo ne grevaunce; ther alle harmes been passed of this present lyf; ther as is the sikernesse fro the peyne of helle; ther as is the blisful compaignye that rejoyysen hem everemo, everich of otheres joye; / ther as the body of man, that whilom was foul and derk, is moore cler than the sonne; ther as the body, that whilom was syk, freele, and fieble, and mortal, is immortal, and so strong and so hool that ther may no thyng aperyen it; / ther as ne is neither hunger, thurst, ne coold, but every soule replenyssed with the sighte of the parfit knowynge of God. / This blisful regne may men purchace by poverte espiritueel, and the glorie by lowenesse, the plentee of joye by hunger and thurst, and the reste by travaile, and the lyf by deeth and mortificacion of synne. (X.1075-80)

The fruit of penitential narrative, however, also requires a response on the part of the individual. In this case, the listener becomes Chaucer the poet, and the response, his Retraction, which is necessary to determine whether the Parson, and his narrative, have been “fructuous” or not. Therefore, it becomes a natural outgrowth of Host Bailley’s initial request in the Parson’s Prologue.

A look back at the earliest presentation of the Tree of Vices, Conrad of Hirsau’s Liber de fructibus carnis et spiritus written for the use of educated members of the clergy in their teaching of “novices and untutored men,” demonstrates the extent to which Chaucer has altered the earliest staging of this didactic apparatus.89 This tract uses the Tree of Vices and the Tree of

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89 For associations of the early twelfth-century tract with Hugh of St. Victor, see O’Reilly, 325, and Katzenellenbogen, 66. For attribution to Conrad of Hirsau, see Newhauser, 160. For the tract’s connection to twelfth-century manuscript diagrams for the clergy and their gradual development for secular use, see the brief discussion in A. Caiger-Smith, English Medieval Mural Paintings (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963), 50.
Virtues to help readers understand the qualities of each tree so they might choose between the two. According to Katzenellenbogen, the author “wishes to convince humanity that it must seek its spiritual salvation in humility and avoid the evil of pride”.\(^{90}\)

\[\ldots\text{necessarium videtur ipsius humilitatis et superbiae fructum et efficaciam quasi formam quamdam visibilem virtutum cultori facie tenus ostendere, quatenus alterutrius speciei, superbiae, vel humilitatis imitator cognoscat ex fructuum qualitate, quid mercedis assequatur ex utriuslibet execuctione. Duas itaque arbusculas fructu et ascensu dissimiles, et rudi, et novello cuilibet converso, adjunctis vitiorum sive virtutum diffinitunculis proponimus, ex quarum radice fructuum proventus pateat, et quae arbor ex duabus eligenda sit allectus fructu discernat.}\(^{91}\)

[It is good to represent the fruits of humility and Pride as a kind of visual image so that anyone studying to improve himself can clearly see what things will result from them. Therefore we show the novices and untutored men two little trees, differing in fruits and in size, each displaying the characteristics of virtues and vices, so that people may understand the products of each and choose which of the trees they would establish in themselves.]\(^{92}\)

The Parson’s notions of narrative and salvation, displayed by means of the allegorical trees of his penitential handbook, stand in direct contrast to those proposed by the first elaborated Tree of Vices. Conrad of Hirsau’s representation offers a superficial and constructed morality that reduces a botanical object rife with material associations to a two-dimensional image. It diminishes complicated theological concepts to simplistic and tidy systems that are not particularly useful even in a simpler world than today. It protects the knowledge of clerics and relegates parishioners to ignorance. The *De fructibus* shapes a limited scheme. It offers an orderly teaching device that assists clerics in fulfilling the mandates of the Church, but it misses the greater messages of the New Testament.

In contrast, the Parson’s depiction of the allegorical trees in his *Tale* offers his lay listener a more compelling and more viable solution to sin than those representations of the period that

\(^{90}\) Katzenellenbogen, 66.

\(^{91}\) PL 176:997.

\(^{92}\) Translation from Caiger-Smith, 50.
oppose the Tree of Vices with the Tree of Virtues. The independent parts of the Parson’s Tale superficially present a quite conventional clerical view of penitence and the vices and virtues.  

But it is the interaction of these parts that reveals the Parson’s vision of how the sinner might both accept and exploit his own vices to further his penitence and achieve his ultimate salvation. In the horticultural narrative that constitutes the Parson’s Tale, organic, natural processes are something to emulate, both in narrative and in the life of the individual. The trees, and their interaction, bespeak a sense of acceptance and resignation, but also personal agency and the ability to accept change. Moreover, the Parson’s “myrie tale in prose” (X.46), which has taken the structure of the Tree of Penitence once its teller turns away from the original metaphor of the pilgrimage, creates a new paradigm for story-telling not yet seen in the Canterbury Tales: a narrative arising from the heart of man. The most fruitful tale, from the Parson’s perspective, is a narrative of penitence. There is nothing inherently bad or evil about the other tales, although the Retraction’s ostensible response to the Parson’s penitential manual is to “revoke” (X.1085) tales “that sownen into synne” (X.1086). For the Parson, the best narrative is one that originates in the human heart and allows memory of the past and hope for the future to stimulate narrative, and ultimately, bring it to fruition. The Retraction, read literally rather than ironically, would seem to echo the Parson’s perspective, although Chaucer does not mean to supplant the foregoing narratives with the Parson’s Tale. As with the Tree of Penitence’s interaction with the Tree of Vices, the Parson’s narrative does not negate the other tales but merely surpasses them in spiritual significance. Ultimately, it is more meaningful for the existence of the other accounts.


94 Similar conclusions, of course, have been proposed by other scholars, but I have used the interaction of the trees of the Tale to arrive at this point. See, for example, Charles A. Owen, Jr., “The Transformation of a Frame Story: The Dynamics of Fiction,” in Chaucer at Albany, ed. Rossell Hope Robbins (New York: Burt Franklin, 1975), 125-146, at 132.
Chaucer places allegorical trees back in the hands of a lay audience, empowering his readers with a compelling narrative that offers both a realistic reflection of how trees work as well as a practical way of working out one’s salvation in a fallen world. By transforming the Christian life from a journey to the Tree of Penitence, Chaucer concentrates on each individual’s process of salvation, a reflexive process in which contrition, confession, and satisfaction are equally important. By resisting a longstanding tradition opposing the Tree of Vices with the Tree of Virtues, Chaucer shifts the focus away from the sinner’s external actions toward the condition of his heart. These alterations to the penitential tradition offer the individual a message of hope in the face of overwhelming sin: when the heart is contrite, radical personal transformation is inevitable. In the triumph of the Tree of Penitence over the Tree of Vices, Chaucer offers his reader a new and accessible Tree of Life, a way of regaining the garden Adam forfeited by eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.
CHAPTER 5

READING THE KNIGHT’S TALE AGAINST MEDIEVAL FOREST LAW: THE POLITICS OF THESEUS’S ROYAL GROVE

Cleer was the day, as I have toold er this,
And Theseus with alle joye and blis,
With his Ypolita, the faire queene,
And Emelye, clothed al in grene,
On huntyng be they riden roially.
And to the grove that stood ful faste by,
In which ther was an hert, as men hym tolde,
Duc Theseus the streighte wey hath holde.
And to the launde he rideth hym ful right,
For thider was the hert wont have his flight,
And over a brook, and so forth on his weye.
This duc wol han a cours at hym or tweye
With houndes swiche as that hym list commaunde.

—Geoffrey Chaucer, The Knight’s Tale (c. 1381-94)

The scene above describes the ideal conditions in which the royal hunt would have proceeded during fourteenth-century England—from the physical environment to the mood, attire, and technique adopted by its participants. Such a hunt in post-Conquest England relied on the successful implementation of forest law to protect game animals and their habitats for the king’s enjoyment. The relevance of forest law to Chaucer’s Knight’s Tale, however, so far has been overlooked despite the precise description of the hunting scene in the grove where much of the action unfolds in the Tale. Moreover, Chaucer himself was a forester, charged in 1390 with the protection of North Petherton Forest. A shortage of evidence about the poet’s assignment

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1 Fragment I, lines 1683-95. Quotations from The Canterbury Tales are from The Riverside Chaucer, 3rd ed., ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), and hereafter are cited parenthetically by fragment and line number. Italics reflect my own emphasis.

2 For a discussion of the specific connections between the Knight’s Tale and medieval hunting, see Oliver Farrar Emerson, “Chaucer and Medieval Hunting,” Romanic Review 13 (1922): 139-43.

and the late date of the position make it impossible to conjecture with any certainty that the role influenced the *Knight’s Tale*. However, the prominence of the grove where Theseus hunts in the *Knight’s Tale* and the possibility that the completed *Tale* post-dates Chaucer’s forestership should at least gesture us toward a more careful analysis of the connection between the grove and royal forest law.

Three factors point to a definitive connection between the grove and forest law. First, forest law exposes an important and well-documented controversy about land use and control through the late medieval period, Chaucer’s career placing him in a unique position between the aristocracy and commoners within the debate. Moreover, contemporary literary works such as the *Tale of Gamelyn* and the Robin Hood ballads engage in the forest polemic pitting the king’s interests in plentiful game for his personal appetites against his subjects’ urgent needs for food or effective land management (or even their own desires for meat and the amusements of the hunt).

Finally, evidence within the *Tale* itself supports the assertion that Chaucer depicts the space as a royal forest and, as a result, interrogates the complicated relationship between a ruler and his subjects. Royal forest law offers an important historical backdrop to the *Tale*, providing a

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4 Some critics dismiss the position as a sinecure. See, for example, David R. Carlson, *Chaucer’s Jobs* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 3; Gervase Mathew, *The Court of Richard II* (London: Murray, 1968), 63. Crow and Olson are more circumspect, noting only the “obscurity of the evidence” (*Chaucer Life-Records*, 496). On the other hand, Benson asserts that the forestership required active responsibility and required business skill (*Riverside Chaucer*, xxv).

5 D. W. Robertson, Jr., uses historical evidence to date the *Tale* as late as 1394 in “The Probable Date and Purpose of Chaucer's *Knight’s Tale*,” *Studies in Philology* 84 (1987): 418-39, especially at 434.

6 *The Tale of Gamelyn* is an English ballad epic of the mid-fourteenth century placed after the *Cook’s Tale* in twenty-five manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales* [Stephen Knight, “The Tale of Gamelyn,” in *Medieval Outlaws: Ten Tales in Modern English*, ed. Thomas H. Ohlgren (UK: Sutton, 1998), 168]. *Gamelyn* is also noted by Maurice Keen as the first surviving English “outlaw legend” in *The Outlaws of Medieval Legend* (London: Routledge, 2000), 88. The ideas in “A Gest of Robyn Hode,” of the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century, are contemporary with the *Knight’s Tale*, as it most likely was compiled around 1400 or even earlier [Keen, 100; Francis James Child, ed., *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, vol. 3 (New York: Dover, 1965), 40].
framework of political and social implications for the three scenes in which the grove is highlighted. Read through the lens of royal forest law, the grove in the *Knight’s Tale* becomes a political space that exposes the limitations of monarchical structures and masculine control while shaping a pragmatic response to these human failures.

Since one of the most significant aspects of medieval wooded areas is royal forest law, examining the grove against royal policy and land use practices as well as contemporary English texts sheds additional light on not only Chaucer’s politicization of the space and Theseus’s regime but also on the poet’s depiction of those characters that come into contact with the grove. In portraying the grove, Chaucer enlists the polemic of arbitrary and absolutist English forest law to consider the position of an autocrat in relation to that of his political subjects. As is perhaps to be expected for a war-hardened narrator, the Knight uses the grove to voice a pessimistic view of masculine desire and control, revealing a deep skepticism about man’s ability to self-regulate desire or exist peacefully within nature. Moreover, the grove critiques—but does not vilify—Theseus’s arbitrary authority and efforts to exercise despotic control over nature. It expresses an abhorrence of war, which the Knight cannot verbalize explicitly. Finally, it offers an alternative model of both authoritative policy and subjecthood—a paradigm that embraces the cyclical patterns of nature and emulates the agency of trees.

Critics of the *Knight’s Tale* tend to agree that the grove where the Duke of Athens hunts is significant. It is the place where Theseus’s disguised squire (and former captive) Arcite performs May-time rituals and the hiding place of his escaped cousin Palamon. It is the location where the Theban cousins initially duel over Theseus’s sister-in-law, Emelye. It is replaced with an amphitheater designed by Theseus to regulate the fight, and it resurfaces only to be decimated for Arcite’s funeral pyre. However, most scholars who have noticed the grove’s import to the
Tale have concentrated on the problem of its recurrence—Theseus supplants it once to accommodate the tournament and fells it a second time for Arcite’s funeral rites. Furthermore, critics are apt to read the grove in terms of a variety of binaries—man versus nature, order versus chaos—stereotyping forests as malevolent, chaotic, and reflective of “humanity’s fraught and often antagonistic relationship with the vegetative natural world.” For example, V. A. Kolve understands the grove as a negative and anarchic force pitted against man, who must destroy it and his own natural impulses in order to contain chaos. Whereas Kolve pronounces the duke’s two-time destruction of the grove an accomplishment, Joshua Eyler and John Sexton consider these attempts at control a complete failure. Such readings are balanced by evidence that the physical nature of forests in medieval England is more beneficial and hospitable to its inhabitants than once was believed, as well as evidence within the Tale itself that suggests Chaucer is exposing Theseus’s (and perhaps the Knight’s) flawed beliefs about nature rather than revealing his own. In fact, the text indicates a measure of discomfort with the destruction of the grove, and the exploitation of the grove demonstrates a failure on the part of humans to consider certain admirable aspects of nature that might well be modeled.

A thorough reading of the grove through the framework of medieval English forest law is crucial both to consider what ecocritics call the “actuality” of trees, the idea that trees are

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8 Gillian Rudd, Greenery: Ecocritical Readings of Late Medieval English Literature (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2007), 67; Eyler and Sexton; and Kolve, 131.
9 Eyler and Sexton, 437.
10 See, for example, David Hill, An Atlas of Anglo-Saxon England (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 17. Hill shows that the perception of an impenetrable and unpleasant medieval English forest is flawed.
11 Lee Patterson, for example, observes that Chaucer exposes contradictions in chivalry through the “offending grove” and other details of the Tale in Chaucer and the Subject of History (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 200.
“splendid living entities” apart from any human purpose, as well as to expose the limits of Theseus’s control and shortcomings and other masculine failures within a benevolent dictatorship. Evidence based on historical texts and the episode in which Theseus hunts the hart, a passage crafted largely from book five of Boccaccio’s *Teseida*, points to a connection between the grove and royal forest law. Historical documents attest to the controversial nature of forest law throughout the post-Conquest period culminating with Chaucer’s position as forester in the 1390s. Whereas the *Knight’s Tale* illustrates man’s inability to live at peace in any setting, the Robin Hood legends and the *Tale of Gamelyn* celebrate the forest as an autonomous space where men can live independently outside of the law. The wooded areas in these outlaw tales express a belief that lawless men can live in harmony among each other and both with and within nature. Chaucer’s more negative perception of humanity explains why the Knight upholds Theseus’s right to govern the grove, although later he will call into question the extent to which it is possible (or advisable) to subject nature to human control.

**The Grove as Royal Forest**

This mene I now by myghty Theseus,
That for to hunten is so desirus,
And namely at the grete hert in May,
That in his bed ther daweth hym no day
That he nys clad, and redy for to ryde
With hunte and horn and houndes hym bisyde.
For in his huntyng hath he swich delit

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12 Rudd, 68.
That it is al his joye and appetit
To been hymself the grete hertes bane,
For after Mars he serveth now Dyane.

(I.1673-1682)

The scene above, in which Theseus prepares for his pursuit of the hart, highlights the anticipation and pleasure of the royal hunt and reveals the poet’s close contact with the royal tradition valuing wooded areas for personal enjoyment. Theseus’s hunt for the hart showcases Chaucer’s extensive personal knowledge of the chase acquired in the service of avid hunters Edward III and Richard II.14 Through his realistic treatment of the sport and his expansive technical lexicon, Chaucer demonstrates his intimate familiarity with royal hunting as it was practiced in medieval England.

Just as Chaucer describes the royal hunt in terms of late fourteenth-century practices, his depiction of the grove represents the place of the hunt as arbitrarily controlled by the king through forest law. Despite a wealth of information on medieval forest law and its connection to the royal hunt, literary scholars surprisingly have not scrutinized the connection of the grove and Theseus’s hunt to the medieval royal forest.15 The connection is illustrated by Richard Fitz Nigel’s definition of royal forest in the twelfth-century Dialogus de Scaccario, expounded here by Charles Petit-Dutaillis:

It consists . . . in preserves which the king has kept for himself in certain well-wooded counties where there is good pasture for the venison. There the king goes to forget his cares in the chase; there he enjoys quiet and freedom: consequently those who commit an

14 For Chaucer’s personal experience with the royal hunt, see Emerson, especially at 122 and 139. See also Richard Almond, who argues that hunting was a “universal activity” in the late medieval period [Medieval Hunting (Stroud: Sutton, 2003), 5]. Almond points out that Chaucer’s education as a gentleman certainly included lessons in hunting (15). For a discussion of Richard II’s hunting practices, see Nigel Saul, Richard II (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), especially at 15, 196, and 452.

15 The relationship between hunting and medieval forest laws has been examined in depth by several historians. See, for example, Charles Petit-Dutaillis; G. J. Turner, Select Pleas of the Forest, Selden Society no. 13 (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1901); and Charles Young, The Royal Forests of Medieval England (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979).
offence against the Forest lay themselves open to the personal vengeance of the king. Their punishment is no concern of the ordinary courts, but depends entirely on the king, or his specially appointed delegate.\(^{16}\)

Despite having been composed at the order of King Henry II nearly two hundred years earlier, \textit{Dialogus}’s description of the medieval English royal forest is still apt in the time of Chaucer.\(^{17}\) First and foremost, it is an area governed by forest law in order to preserve favorable hunting conditions for the king: just as the \textit{Dialogus} notes that a royal forest is reserved for the sovereign’s pursuit of game and personal recreation, so does the \textit{Knight’s Tale} emphasize the grove’s significance to Theseus as a protected area reserved for his own enjoyment.\(^{18}\)

Additionally, in both texts, forest offenders are vulnerable to the ruler’s personal retribution. One way in which Chaucer suggests that the grove is a protected area is by making it central to Theseus’s domain, locating the grove closer geographically to Theseus’s residence and his judicial arm, the prison, than does his source. By insisting on the grove’s centrality to Theseus’s dominion, Chaucer increases the duke’s authority over the space. Whereas Boccaccio describes the grove as a cool, remote bower three miles from the city where Arcite often goes to lament his ill-starred love for Emilia and to sleep by a stream under a pine tree,\(^{19}\) Chaucer locates the grove at first mention close to the prison (“faste there bisyde,” I.1478). Later he positions the grove but a short distance from Theseus’s court when Arcite rides “Out of the court, were it a myle or tweye. / And to the grove” (I.1504-1505), and finally, he notes that the grove “stood ful faste by” (I.1688) Theseus’s residence.

\(^{16}\) Petit-Dutaillis, 149.


\(^{18}\) See Young, 3, and Petit-Dutaillis, 150, for an explanation of the term “royal forest” and a discussion of the variety of landscapes comprising land protected under forest law.

\(^{19}\) Giovanni Boccaccio, \textit{Theseid of the nuptials of Emilia = Teseida delle nozze di Emilia}, comp. and trans. Vincenzo Traversa, Currents in Comparative Romance Languages and Literatures, vol. 116 (New York: P. Lang, 2002), 448. All \textit{Teseida} citations are from this edition and are cited parenthetically by book and stanza number.
As if to strengthen the grove’s status as a protected space and tie it to royal forest law, the primary purpose of which is to preserve game for the king’s pleasure, Chaucer celebrates Theseus’s great love of hunting. Unlike Boccaccio, Chaucer makes hunting a central feature of Theseus’s character by emphasizing the frequency with which the duke zealously pursues the hunt: “ther daweth hym no day / That he nys clad, and redy for to ryde / With hunte and horn and houndes hym bisyde” (I.1676-78). Moreover, the hunting passage features Theseus’s excitement and passion for the sport. Chaucer emphasizes the duke’s “joye and appetit to been hymself the grete hertes bane” (I.1680-81), and he reiterates that Theseus finds “joy and blis” in the hunt, is “so desirus” (I.1674) of the “grete hert” (I.1675), and takes “swich delit” (I.1679) in the pursuit. By contrast, Boccaccio depicts the hunt as more of a carefree entertainment than a single-minded passion. In the Teseida, no emotion is cited in connection with Theseus and the hunt, and the game is unspecified as each member of Boccaccio’s large company goes “at will here and there in the thick grove, one catching birds and another animals” (V.77). Boccaccio’s hunting party merely passes the time, more in leisure than in ardent pursuit of a royal quarry.

In addition to positioning the grove near Theseus’s personal lands and to figuring the duke’s pleasure in his sylvan pastime, Chaucer’s addition of Theseus’s chosen prey, the great hart, offers more evidence for the grove as royal forest. Hunting this type of game animal was almost exclusively a privilege restricted to the king by law. The hart, a male deer at least six years old with well-developed antlers, would have been prized then as now for its size, imposing appearance, and wary intelligence. These traits lend to the perception that the cautious and alert hart constitutes noble prey, worthy of a great huntsman. In fact, The Master of Game, the Duke of York’s early fifteenth-century translation of Le Livre de Chasse that dedicates an entire chapter to the hart and his nature, stresses that the hart “is the fairest hunting, that any man may
hunt after.” Harts are described as the “lightest (swiftest) beasts and strongest, and of marvellous great cunning,” with “great strength in the head and the body.” Chaucer’s introduction into the grove of a hart, an animal specified as royal game in the later Middle Ages, adds to the sense that the Duke perceives this wooded area as his personal pleasaunce. Unquestionably, Chaucer’s Theseus is thoroughly vested in the hunt: the place of the hunt is central to his domain, the hunt itself fundamental to his lifestyle, and the quarry particularly suited to his own nobility.

Forest law not only explains the personal and physical connections of the grove to Theseus found in the Knight’s Tale, but also accounts for a measure of predictability and the initial sense of influence Theseus has over the grove that underscores his later failure to govern the space. Although a narrative in which “the goddes above” (I.2479) predestine events from afar might characterize the Tale as “a narrative dominated by chance,” Chaucer reduces several of the fatalistic aspects found in the Teseida in order to emphasize Theseus’s control. For example, the arrival of Theseus in the grove is less coincidental than in Boccaccio because of Theseus’s love of hunting and deliberate pursuit of the hart to the grove. Chaucer’s source emphasizes this space as one regularly and frequently used for Arcite’s emotional relief and only occasionally by the Duke and his retinue for hunting. Boccaccio’s hunt lacks focus or a particular plan. Instead, this random adventure includes Theseus, Emilia, and a large group with falcons and dogs who aimlessly pass the time with “their hunt and their amusements” (V.78). Rather than emphasize the chance nature of Theseus’s entry into the grove where the Thebans are fighting, as does

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21 Edward, 23.
Boccaccio,23 Chaucer uses the avid hunter’s arrival in his own royal grove, a place where the most noble of game might be found, to provide an element of stability and predictability to the Tale.

The fact that Theseus’s life intersects with the Theban cousins in the grove is not surprising, especially when considering forest law’s connection to the Knight’s Tale. The importance Chaucer assigns to the location of Theseus’s hunt, the grove, appears reasonable given the controversial nature of hunting areas and royal forest law throughout the post-Conquest period. Indeed, Petit-Dutaillis points to four ways in which modern scholars might read the Forest: “as a melancholy and decisive witness to the brutality of the Norman Conquest, as an illustration of the despotic authority of the Norman and Angevin kings, as a cause of the hostility of the barons and higher clergy towards the crown, or as a ground for the hatred felt by the people towards the king’s officers.”24 While this view of the royal forest demonstrates what Tony Pollard recently has called a late-twentieth century bias against hunting, a bias that tends to “highlight only [common man’s] struggle against repression,”25 the historical evidence demonstrates that forest law continued to be an issue through Chaucer’s time and the subject of popular literary works far beyond.

A brief examination of this evidence demonstrates that tension surrounding forest law is a medieval commonplace and therefore relevant to a reading of the grove in the Knight’s Tale. Starting with Cnut (1016-35), forest laws engendered a bitter polemic about the extent of royal

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23 “We see something that did not occur in a thousand years take place suddenly, so it really happened then that Theseus and Emilia went out of Athens with a large company” (V.77).

24 Petit-Dutaillis, 147.

power to appropriate nature, placing a burden on aristocratic landowners and even commoners.26 Upper class landowners, however, were most affected. Not only did forest law restrict landowners’ hunting privileges on their land that had been incorporated into the royal forest, but it also prevented them from making the best use of their own land, whether for fuel, upkeep, or pasture that would benefit their households.27 Furthermore, since game was protected in the royal forest, which at the beginning of the thirteenth century may have covered a third of all land in England, those owning land in these areas were prohibited from controlling the game population even by means of a hedge or ditch.28 The economic effects were considerable, particularly in a time of food shortage when the teeming game might devastate a landowner’s crops. The system, essentially enlisting nature as a monarchical subject, suffered certain political consequences. In particular, it resulted in the royal forest becoming appropriately symbolic of “arbitrary power” and an oppressive monarchical regime.29

The economic and political tensions surrounding the royal forest were largely an issue for the aristocracy until the fourteenth century, when Richard II transformed the polemic from a point of contention landowners had with the king to a divisive issue between the upper and lower classes. The royal forests had begun a gradual decline from 1327, and certainly, Edward III (1327-1377) and Richard II (1377-1399) generally were more democratic than the Norman kings in their implementation of forest policies by reducing the size of protected areas and loosening


27 Young, 164-65, 171. Petit-Dutaillis, 156-57, details the restrictions and fine system imposed on landowners.

28 Petit-Dutailles, 163-64, observes that at this time thirty-three of thirty-nine counties contained Forest, and all of Essex was under forest law.

29 Ibid., 165.
restrictions on pasturing and wood-cutting.\textsuperscript{30} Such “generosity” was less from a desire to open
protected wooded areas to a larger public than from reduced dependence on forest revenue in the
wake of a national system of taxation, however.\textsuperscript{31} Evidence from the late fourteenth century
suggests that royal forests continued to be associated with a monarch’s “arbitrary authority,” and
the lower classes apparently felt that forest policies infringed on their rights.\textsuperscript{32} For example, in
the Revolt of 1381, the peasants demanded of Richard II the right to hunt and fish freely
anywhere game could be found:

\begin{quote}
All warrens, as well in fisheries as in parks and woods, should be common to all; so that
throughout the realm, in the waters, ponds, fisheries, woods and forests, poor as well as
rich might take the venison and hunt the hare in the fields.\textsuperscript{33}
\end{quote}

While this sentiment is echoed in the Robin Hood ballads and the \textit{Tale of Gamelyn}, readings of
which appear at the end of this chapter, it is unlikely that Chaucer favored expanding
commoners’ rights this far because of his own associations with royal power. Men in Chaucer’s
position were in fact those assailed by the rebels,\textsuperscript{34} and in the aftermath of the 1381 revolt,
Chaucer had an official role as justice in restoring order and preventing future rebellion.\textsuperscript{35} Even
more direct evidence assessing Chaucer’s attitudes toward the rebels is found in the \textit{Nun’s
Priest’s Tale}, wherein Chaucer’s casual but negative reference to revolt leader Jack Straw
suggests little sympathy for the populist cause.

During Richard II’s reign, Chaucer witnessed a fundamental change in forest policy that
dispossessed commoners of the chase, which until this time had been “free in England” outside

\textsuperscript{30} Young, 149-54.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 158.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 171.
\textsuperscript{33} Cited from \textit{Knighton’s Chronicle} in Keen, 166.
\textsuperscript{34} Carlson, 18, cited from \textit{Chaucer Life Records}, 349.
\textsuperscript{35} Carlson, 17.
of the royal forest and parks belonging to the nobility.\textsuperscript{36} Given Chaucer’s tendency to commemorate—if not celebrate—class diversity in the \textit{General Prologue}, it seems unlikely that he would wholly approve of the king’s heavy-handed response to the request to eliminate property rights. Essentially, Richard II’s statute of 1390 acted as a legal rebuttal to the forest privileges demanded by the rebels of 1381. Instead of expanding the forest rights of commoners, the king further stripped them of their long-held hunting privileges. Until 1390, hunting had been free to commoners except in the royal forest and areas for which wealthy landowners had received the king’s permission to hunt. But Richard II’s 1390 statute encouraged a monopoly on hunting for the king and wealthy landowners on the grounds that commoners were hunting with dogs on holy days when they should be in church. On this pretext, Richard II reserved the right to the “gentlemen’s game” to laymen with incomes of more than 40 shillings per year (and clerics of more than ten pounds a year), a violation of which would mean one year in prison.\textsuperscript{37}

It is clear from the \textit{Knight’s Tale} that Chaucer is not concerned with the dilemma of commoners with regards to hunting privileges. Rather, in drawing on the dialectic of royal forest tradition, Chaucer raises questions about the \textit{extent} of the ruler’s power over nature and his subjects. The evidence establishes that royal forests were protected solely for the king’s privilege and were associated with a monarch’s arbitrary and tyrannical authority over his subjects. This polemic is elucidated by Theseus’s confrontation of Palamon and Arcite in which the duke angrily stops the Thebans’ duel in the grove and threatens their lives if they should continue. The passage emphasizes the violent contest that threatens the very trees of the grove, Theseus’s rapid conversion from his temporary service of Diana back to the service of Mars (I.1682), and the duke’s fury at the way in which his hunting grove has been transformed to a battleground:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{36} Petit-Dutaillis, 155. See also Almond, 33.
\item \textsuperscript{37} Young, 169.
\end{itemize}
The brighte swerdes wenten to and fro
So hidously that with the leeste strook
It semed as it wolde felle an ook.
But what they were, no thyng he ne woot.
This duc his courser with his spores smoot,
And at a stert he was bitwix hem two,
And pulled out a swerd and cride, “Hoo!
Namoore, up peyne of lesynge of youre heed!
By myghty Mars, he shal anon be deed
That smyteth any strook that I may seen.
But telleth me what myster men ye been,
That been so hardy for to fighten heere
Withouten juge or oother officere,
As it were in a lystes roially.

(I.1700-13)

Theseus reacts vehemently to the intrusion in a manner not found in Chaucer’s source. While critics largely have interpreted his reaction as one that stems from the Thebans’ disregard for the rules of dueling, which stipulate the presence of a mediating officere, an even greater reason for his anger derives from their trespassing on his hunting area and interrupting his hunt.38

Theseus’s confrontation of the Thebans in the grove corresponds with the tyranny demonstrated by English kings in relation to royal forest law and thus emphasizes the importance of the space. Historical documents reveal that even minor forest offenses could be punished cruelly. A mere jaunt through the land with hunting dogs or removing an already dead fawn from the property prompted imprisonment.39 The text, therefore, accepts Theseus’s authority over the space irrespective of the immediate cause of the ruler’s anger. The noise and movement of the Thebans’ fight, blows strong enough to fell trees, effectively have ended Theseus’s chance at the hart. His raised sword, imperatives, and threat of death bespeak his power to govern this space, a place for his own hunt which he distinguishes from fighting in a “lystses roially” (I.1713).

38 See, for example, Vincent J. DiMarco, “Explanatory Notes to the Knight’s Tale,” in the Riverside Chaucer, 833-34.
Before he determines the punishment for his hunt’s disruption, he asks “what myster men ye been” (I.1710), demanding that they properly present themselves. The punishment for the Thebans, it seems, may depend on the men’s status. After all, Theseus’s question attests to his dominion over the grove and also reflects the polemic in Chaucer’s own time concerning which individuals are allowed into a protected hunting area.

Although forest laws came to represent a monarch’s arbitrary authority and an unfair burden on landowners and commoners alike, it is important to note here that not everyone in England outside of the king himself (and in Chaucer’s time, the aristocracy as well) resented royal forest law and its consequences. The king’s administrators, of which group Chaucer would become a part at the end of the fourteenth century, actually benefited from the existence of the royal forests. Since forest positions often were hereditary, they were valued much like property for their income potential. These foresters gained a certain level of notoriousness, much of it justified. However, as the king’s agent Chaucer seems to reject or at least ignore the aspect of corruption associated with the forest polemic within the Tale. After all, throughout his life the nature of his positions demanded that he align himself with royal power. In his position not only as a forester but also as a dependant on the king’s good will—or more bluntly stated, as “an official of the repressive apparatus of state”—the poet occupied a middle position between the aristocracy, on the one hand, and those disaffected by forest policy, on the other.

As a forester, Chaucer would have been associated, at least in name, with a despotic and oppressive system perpetuated by abuses on the part of the king’s forest officials and the growing infamy of foresters. For instance, common forest abuses range from taking oaks, underbrush, hay, and honey for personal gain, allowing illegal hunting and pasture, arresting men

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40 See Young, 162-65.
41 Carlson, 1.
and taking bribes for their release, and not accounting for or turning over such payments to the king. Such abuses continued into the late fourteenth century. In 1372 and 1376, Commons petitions complain of foresters who overstepped their jurisdiction, and a 1383 petition implies that “men were being imprisoned without indictment and distrained by ministers of the forest until they paid fines for redemption.” Even Chaucer’s own *Physician’s Tale* includes the proverb suggesting that the best forester is of less than impeccable moral character: “A theef of venysoun, that hath forlaft / His likerousnesse and al his olde craft, / Kan kepe a forest best of any man” (VI.83-5). By the late fourteenth century, administrative corruption and forest abuses as well as the divisive nature of hunting privileges set the stage in which Chaucer would write the *Knight’s Tale*.

Despite a reputation for taking advantage of the position, foresters were vital to the king’s success in hunting. Theseus’s knowledge of the hart’s presence and where he should pursue his hunt within the *Tale* probably is owed to such “men hym tolde” (I.1689) of the hart’s presence. In medieval England, the responsibility of reporting the presence and location of game to the king was the job of game masters, who determined where the king should hunt. One of the few original chapters of the *Master of Game*, the Duke of York’s translation of the late fourteenth-century *Le Livre de Chasse*, asserts, “The Master of Game should be in accordance with the master forester or parker where it should be that the King should hunt such a day.” Like the forester, the game master, assisted by the king’s men and hounds, established the part of the

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42 See Young, 166-67, for a list of charges against a forest warden in 1355.
43 Ibid., 147 and 156, respectively.
44 Chapter 36 in Edward, Duke of York, 188, also cited in Emerson, 121. Emerson, 116, note 5, explains that chapters 22, 26, and 34-36 were original to the English translation. See pages 152-53, above.
forest where the hunt would take place.45 Theseus’s ability to hunt the hart effectively is similarly dependent on hunt administrators who direct his strategy.

Chaucer’s role as forester likely made him aware of the association of the royal forest with potential abuse, but he eschews this aspect of controversy in favor of focusing on a ruler’s ability to control such a space. This distinguishes the Knight’s grove from wooded areas in contemporary works such as the Tale of Gamelyn and the Robin Hood ballads, which possess autonomy unlikely in a work that upholds the sovereign’s power over natural spaces. The Robin Hood ballads, for example, which appear to be popular during Chaucer’s time at least a century before the first extant texts,46 underline Barbara Hanawalt’s argument that forest law was hated “not because it was relentless in its efficiency and punishment, but because it encroached on one of the perceived rights of medieval men of all classes and status groups: the freedom to exploit the natural environment.”47 Perhaps because of his positions as representative of the king’s authority throughout his adulthood, Chaucer looks at this polemic first through the lens of Duke Theseus rather than his subjects. To what extent, he asks, can the duke govern and control the natural space of the grove? The Tale of Gamelyn and the Robin Hood ballads, however, categorically dispense with the assumption that natural spaces can be controlled at all.

Whereas the grove in the Knight’s Tale is subject, for better and for worse, to Theseus (although the duke’s control over the space is tenuous at best), the wooded areas in the Robin Hood ballads enjoy a freedom envisioned by the demands of the commoners in the 1381 Peasant

45 Emerson, 121.
46 Keen explains that although the earliest surviving ballads are of the fifteenth century, Robin Hood had long been a “traditional figure” (78). William Langland mentions the ballads in Piers Plowman, and Robin and Marion are frequent characters in thirteenth-century motets and pastourelles, as well as in a comic opera of 1280 performed annually in the fourteenth century (Child, 46).
Revolt. For instance, the oldest extant ballad, “Robin Hood and the Monk” of the mid-fifteenth century, opens with an idyllic picture of the forest. The expansive summer foliage draws the songbirds and the deer to the “grene-wode tre” associated in several ballads with Robin Hood:

In somer, when þe shawes be sheyne,  
And leves be large and long,  
Hit is full mery in feyre foreste  
To here þe foulys song:  
To se þe dere draw to þe dale,  
And leve þe hilles hee,  
And shadow hem in þe levës grene,  
Vnder the grene-wode tre.

The joyous environs of the forest are a direct result of its independence from external control, although at first reading it appears to be under the domain of the outlaw, Robin Hood, who seems to have settled the problem of forest law to his own satisfaction. That is, he ignores forest law entirely. Although it is clear that Robin Hood is aware of forest law restrictions, his blatant disregard for those proscriptions emphasizes the grove’s autonomy as well as his own. This idea is accentuated in another early ballad, “A Gest of Robyn Hode,” in which outlaws essentially claim the king’s royal forest as their own. Robin Hood, after feeding the disguised king with a feast of poached deer, candidly asserts that he and his men live by poaching the king’s deer:

We be yemen of this foreste,  
Vnder the grenë-wode tre;  
We lyue by our kyngës dere,  
[Other shyft haue not wee.]

Robin Hood claims unofficial position in the king’s domain for his men and himself (“We are yeomen of the forest”) and stakes out territory the king imagines to be his own (“under the

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48 See Keen, 173, for indirect connections between the Peasants’ Revolt and the Robin Hood ballads.
49 For dating of this ballad, see Child, 94.
50 Ibid., 97, lines 1-8.
51 Ibid., 74, stanza 377.
greenwood tree”). This unabashed appropriation of a space long held to be the purview of the king has an equalizing effect: the forest of Robin Hood legend is communal property, no longer a subject of the king’s authority.

Closely linked to Chaucer’s time (and manuscripts), the Tale of Gamelyn shares this communal philosophy of wooded areas, starkly contrasting with the dialectic of the grove in the Knight’s Tale that affirms the ruling power’s authority to govern its space while acknowledging the limitations of human control over nature. The forest emerges as a shelter for the disenfranchised youngest son, the text sympathizing with the son’s land rights in contradiction with laws of primogeniture. The largest problem and point in favor of the disinherited son, though, is the eldest son’s neglect of his landholdings. This neglect is what stimulates Gamelyn to turn against the law and eventually take to the woods for freedom. At first he walks cautiously in the forest (“into the wode stalked stille,” 613) after saying to his ally Adam Spencer, “Better is ther louse [free] than in the toune bounde” (602). Adam Spencer characterizes the experience negatively: “Yit lever me were kayes to bere, / Than walken in this wilde wode my clothese to tere” (“I would rather carry my keys than walk in the wild woods tearing my clothes,” 616-17). However, the fugitives’ unenthusiastic attitude toward their surroundings changes when they look “under wode bough” (628) and find a merry, well-fed group of outlaws. Unapologetically sympathizing with the plight of the one who “most nedes walk in feeld that may not in toune” (667), the author portrays the 140 armed outlaws in the woods as civilized men. Ultimately, Gamelyn becomes king of the outlaws and eventually turns the law against his brother. In reward for his behavior, the King restores him into society by making him the chief justice of the free

52 “He thought on his landes that lay unsowe, / And his fare okes that doune were ydrawe; / His parkes were broken and his deer reved; / Of alle his good stedes noon was hym byleved; / His hous were unhilled and ful evell dight” [The Tale of Gamelyn, in Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales, ed. Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren (Kalamazoo, MI: Published for TEAMS in association with the University of Rochester by Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 1997), lines 83-87]. Hereafter cited parenthetically by line number.
forest. The forest, then, is a happy place of alternative civilization, and men are to be nature’s custodians and preservers. The text does not suggest that the king’s authority over the forest precludes that of the outlaws who find freedom in the space.

While the Robin Hood ballads and the *Tale of Gamelyn* celebrate nature as an ungovernable space, free to all men and not subject to the king, the *Knight’s Tale* accepts the legal reality of the duke Theseus’s dominion over the grove while at the same time exposing the problems of such totalitarian control. However, it anticipates no clear solution to the resolution of the tension between ruler and subject as it relates to land use and forest law.

**The Grove as Political Space**

Portraying Theseus’s grove as an English royal forest in sharp contrast to other contemporary works that engage the polemic surrounding forest rights, the Knight upholds the Duke’s right to govern the space as he wishes. The source text and the remaining two scenes featuring the grove merit consideration in order to see the extent to which Chaucer politicizes the grove, rather than romanticize it as does his primary source, Boccaccio’s *Teseida*. Reflecting as it does a contemporary debate over English forest law, the grove becomes a space infused by humans with political meaning and conflict. The grove, therefore, initially appears not as respite for an anguished lover as in the *Teseida*, but as a hiding place for Theseus’s escaped prisoner Palamon, who plans to take cover in the grove by day before returning to Thebes, gathering an army, and attacking Athens to win Emelye.

In contrast to the *Teseida*, which concentrates on the Theban’s love interest, the grove of the *Knight’s Tale* contains and even enables a potential political threat against Theseus. In Boccaccio, Palamon’s only thought is that to win Emelye, he must first engage his cousin Arcite
in battle. Thus, as he goes to the grove in the *Teseida*, he intends to force Arcite to relinquish Emelye or die in battle. It must be noted that Boccaccio’s Palamon gives no thought to the political confrontation with Theseus that surely must ensue once his escape has been discovered (V.11-12). In contrast, Palamon of the *Knight’s Tale* recognizes that Theseus is the true obstacle to his desire, and he sees war with the Duke as his only option to win Emelye from the Athenian despot. In its first appearance in the *Knight’s Tale*, the grove offers short-lived political refuge to Theseus’s enemy, an escaped prisoner of war who intends to combat the Duke and his realm.

Chaucer immediately deploys the autocratic connotations of forest law by contrasting the severity of Palamon’s situation within the grove with Arcite’s May “observaunce” (I.1500), which should remind readers of the arbitrary nature and withdrawal of Theseus’s favor. While Palamon is “in a bussh, that no man myghte hym se, / For soore afered of his deeth was he” (I.1517-18), his cousin, who now serves in Theseus’s court disguised as a squire, is merrily frolicking in the fields, winding garlands “In hope that I som grene gete may” (I.1512). Chaucer never allows his reader to forget that Arcite, notwithstanding his apparent freedom under a different guise, survives at the mercy of Theseus’s authority. For instance, he underscores the tenuous nature of Arcite’s position by reminding us, as Arcite rides to the grove, that the disguised Theban is now Theseus’s “squier principal” (I.1498) in the royal court. Theseus’s authoritarian control extends to the natural space of the grove where Arcite and Palamon attempt to find refuge.

Despite the fragile stations of the disguised Arcite and the fleeing Palamon within Theseus’s realm, the men exert their own dominance onto the landscape. The opening description of the grove at first is reminiscent of the idyllic picture of the greenwood in “Robin Hood and the Monk,” but in contrast to the outlaw texts where men live joyfully in wooded.
spaces, human presence disrupts the tranquility of Chaucer’s grove. The reader can only imagine Boccaccio’s peaceful, cool bower from a distance, for despite the very different circumstances of Palamon’s and Arcite’s ingress, the entry of each man into the grove violates its tranquility. Therefore, the Knight paints a picture of the grove’s charm only as Arcite sees it from his courser. The singing lark and the fiery sun greet the morning dawn as rays of light begin to dry the dewdrops hanging on the leaves:

The bisy larke, messager of day,
Salueth in hir song the morwe gray,
And firy Phebus riseth up so bright
That al the orient laugheth of the light,
And with his stremes dryeth in the greves
The silver dropes hangynge on the leves.

(I.1491-96)

Chaucer teases the reader with the possibility of dawn’s hope and renewal, but this is the only time we are to see the peaceful activity of the grove inviolate—and even this glimpse is from afar.

Whereas the charm of the wooded areas in the Robin Hood ballads and the Tale of Gamelyn is not disturbed by the presence of the outlaws, the male presence in the grove of the Knight’s Tale interrupts and supersedes the business of nature. The grove’s charm is spoiled, for instance, by the restlessness and “lusty herte” (I.1513) that Arcite brings to the space. He gets off his horse and “Into the grove ful hastily he sterte, / And in a path he rometh up and doun” (I.1514-15). His agitation is almost ludicrous in contrast to the foregoing description of the grove and its natural movement. His merriment gives way to a fit of laughable melancholy “[a]s doon thise loveres in heir queynte geres, / Now in the crope, now doun in the breres, / Now up, now doun, as boket in a welle” (I.1531-33). Even his mood, the Knight suggests, is erratic, and so, after Arcite “had songe, he gan to sike/ And sette hym doun” (I.1540-41). The freshness of the
grove at dawn yields to the Theban’s restive human presence—and ironically the May
celebration that is supposed to observe love and nature in general and particularly the rebirth of
spring seems inexorably to lead back to human problems.53

The human problem at hand is, of course, the political situation of the Tale, a point
underlined by the way in which Chaucer limits the grove’s role as a sanctuary from the
oppressive nature of the court and Theseus’s regime. In Boccaccio’s rendition, Arcite frequents
the grove partly because the place is “so far removed from people’s paths that he could easily
give vent with words to his love’s ardor for long or shorter time” (IV.64). Although his
uninhibited voicing of emotion often expresses despair in the Teseida, the disguised Theban can
sleep restfully in the grove without fear of revealing his love for Emelye to the public (IV.63, 72-
73). Boccaccio’s grove, “unspoilt until the time of Arcite’s funeral . . . a symbol of peace,
security, and permanence through natural change,”54 offers the disguised Theban freedom to
articulate his desire. This sense of political sanctuary is disturbed in the Knight’s Tale by the
proverbial saying that since even a wood has ears, it is wise for a man to deport himself with
cautions:

But sooth is seyd, go sithen many yeres,
That ‘feeld hath eyen and the wode hath eres.’
It is ful fair a man to beren hym evene,
For al day meeteth men at unset stevene.

(I.1521-24)

53 See, for example, The Romaunt of the Rose, lines 51-106, in which May is described as the “tyme of love and
jolite” (52), “wodes eek recoveren grene” (57), etc. For a discussion of English May Day customs, see John Brand,
Observations on the Popular Antiquities of Great Britain: Chiefly Illustrating the Origin of our Vulgar and
Provincial Customs, Ceremonies, and Superstitions, vol. 1 (London: George Bell and Sons, 1895), 212-47.

This utterance limits free speech even in a place of seclusion, and it is safe to say that Chaucer’s grove is no sanctuary from either Theseus’s sovereignty or from the political and romantic turmoil the Theban cousins must confront.

When Arcite finally does begin to speak after his restless and aimless walk about the grove, he bemoans the political situation in which he finds himself rather than voicing his anguished desire, which in Boccaccio is encouraged free articulation by the peaceful grove. This anguish, far removed from his “lusty herte” (I.1513) and the May frolicking that initiates his trip to the grove, takes the form of a lament in which he regrets the day he was born. Rather than kindling or relieving his immediate desire for Emelye, the grove seem to remind him of his own ancestry and familial home. He is as much an interloper in the natural space as in Theseus’s household. Protesting that he is of the royal lineage of Cadmus and should not be subject to his “mortal enemy” (I.1553), he traces his own situation as Theseus’s servant to Juno’s cruelty toward Thebes:

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How longe, Juno, thurgh thy crueltee,
Woltow werreyen Thebes the citee?
Allas, ybrogth is to confusioun
The blood roial of Cadme and Amphioun—
Of Cadmus, which that was the firste man
That Thebes bulte, or first the toun bigan,
And of the citee first was crownd kyng.
Of his lynage am I and his ofspryng
By verray ligne, as of the stok roial,
And now I am so caytyf and so thral,
That he that is my mortal enemy,
I serve hym as his squier povrely.  
(I.1543-54)
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Although he eventually mentions his desire for Emelye, Arcite primarily bemoans his political situation, remembering his royal lineage as if inspired by the grove’s antiquity and history to recollect his own.
Under royal forest law, a wooded area has one essential purpose—to serve the king—yet the grove’s capacity to fuel human emotion and to stimulate memory proves to be a source of independent agency in the *Knight’s Tale*. Writing of how trees in England “constitute senses of place and identity,” Andrew Garner argues, “Trees, particularly coppiced trees, provide the material link between past and present. While people can pretend to be someone else in a different time, trees, even if managed, are natural. They provide an organic link between past and current experience.” In contrast to Boccaccio in which the grove allows Arcite to voice his desire freely and then eases his sorrow, the grove moves Arcite to consider the original cause of his suffering—political turmoil in Thebes—and the present result—pretense and servitude. The natural space and grove’s lack of artifice appears to remind Arcite not of his love for Emelye, but of his true identity, his masquerade, and the political conflicts outside the grove.

Although Chaucer’s grove has a measure of potency in its ability to elicit human emotion, in this case Arcite’s grief over his political situation, the wooded area lacks the power of Boccaccio’s to soothe even temporarily the political threat and personal restlessness generated by Arcite and Palamon. Whereas the grove in Boccaccio heals Arcite’s torment enough to allow peaceful sleep, Chaucer’s grove only excacerbates Arcite’s anguish. Rather than falling asleep until morning after his lament, the man falls “doun in a traunce, / A longe tyme, and after he up sterte” (I.1572-73). It is fitting that Arcite finds no tranquility in the space so firmly defined by Chaucer as under the Duke’s control, for as long as it remains under Theseus’s purview, Arcite is at risk of receiving the severe (and arbitrary) penalties implied under royal forest law. The same is true for Boccaccio’s Palamon, who goes to the grove in search of a fight with Arcite. The grove’s presence, however, immediately calms him. Despite his desire to fight for Emelye’s

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hand, Palamon is delayed by the peace of the scenario as he sees the moon shining on Arcite asleep by the stream under the pine tree. Palamon tranquilly waits beside his cousin, therefore, until the morning song of the birds wakes Arcite. Ironically, the cousins’ initial meeting is peaceful, the pair exchanging greetings and sharing their adventures before words fail in finding a resolution to the problem. Moreover, the first sword is drawn only after long discussion and the formal duel begins. Quite the contrary is true in *The Knight’s Tale*, where the primary emotion engaged by the two men is “ire” (I.1576). Upon hearing Arcite’s lament, Palamon seems to feel “a coold swerd sodeynliche glyde” (I.1575) through his heart as he shakes with anger, “face deed and pale” (I.1578). Arcite’s first response to Palamon is to draw a literal sword “[a]s fiers as leon” (I.1598). It is as if the grove, subject to royal control, has lost its native ability to exert peaceful influence. Read against a background of Theseus’s autocratic dominion, it serves only to reflect and even sharpen the masculine desires that intrude.

Rather than confer the wooded area with the power to pacify, Chaucer juxtaposes the subject grove against the actions of the Theban cousins to highlight man’s inability to coexist peacefully with nature or even with other men. At every point, Chaucer stresses the conflict between the two men and opposes it to the interrupted tranquility of the grove. One way in which he underscores the contrast between the hostile Thebans and the grove is to remind the reader of the hitherto peaceful location with several geographic references. First, Palamon challenges Arcite with death although he has “no wepene . . . in this place” (I.1591). Arcite echoes Palamon, “Nere it that thou art sik and wood for love, / And eek that thow no wepne hast in this place, / Thou sholdest nevere out of this grove pace” (I.1600-1602). The repetition reminds the reader that “this place” is indeed an unsuitable one for human conflict: the day has begun with Palamon’s flight for his life and May’s celebration of spring and rebirth, but it ends with Arcite’s
ordered plan to fight the following day with proper arms procured for Palamon. Again the Knight stresses the location of the fight: “if so be that thou my lady wynne, / And sle me in this wode ther I am inne, / Thow mayst wel have thy lady as for me” (I.1617-19). The physical space of the grove reminds Chaucer’s reader that the human conflicts the Thebans bring to the grove are antithetical to the legal purpose of such a place let alone to the more predictable workings of nature.

Chaucer reiterates the Knight’s conviction that man is incapable of harmony with nature—or within nature, as Arcite cannot find even a temporary measure of peace in the private space as he gives voice to his rebellion against Theseus. Once disturbed by humans, Chaucer’s grove becomes an immediate place of violence, as opposed to the *Teseida*, where Palamon and Arcite initially greet each other warmly and speak as old friends despite Palamon’s intent when he enters the grove (V.38-39). Additionally, Palamon’s plan to bring weapons into the formerly peaceful place (I.1628-35) negates the Knight’s repetition that Arcite has no weapons. Chaucer’s grove cannot offer peace or solace to the agonizing Theban cousins because it is as powerless as they themselves are in Theseus’s domain. And, although the Knight seems to celebrate the chivalric trappings of the Thebans’ animalistic fight, the text itself belies the suggestion that the actions of the men are truly heroic.

Rather, Chaucer depicts the Thebans as invaders who exert the rules of warfare on the hitherto peaceful grove. Arcite ritualistically transforms the space into a battlefield the morning after he first has interrupted the natural, bustling activity of the grove. This time, Chaucer provides no description of the grove, as if the human interruption has brought to an end the natural activities of the space. Replacing the lark and the morning sun of the day before are Arcite, Palamon, and their battle gear. Battle imagery replaces the language of landscape:
... And on the morwe, er it were dayes light,
Ful prively two harneyes hath he dight,
Bothe suffisaunt and mete to darreyne
The bataille in the feeld bitwix hem tweyne;
And on his hors, allone as he was born,
He carieth al the harneyes hym biforn.
And in the grove, at tyme and place yset,
This Arcite and this Palamon ben met.

(I.1629-36)

The text intimates that “civilized” warfare is something less than civilized by emphasizing the animalistic nature of the fight juxtaposed against its chivalric facade. The effect of the animal imagery through the passage starkly contrasts with the chivalric gestures that precede the duel.

“As frendly as he were his owene brother” (I.1652), each man helps his opponent to arm himself, an irony that is exposed by “sharp speres strong” (I.1653) and the brutal conflict that ensues. Chaucer resituates a Teseida reference to the lion and bear in the anticipatory moments before the fight and later refers to the men as “a wood leon” (I.1656) and “a cruuel tigre” (I.1657), both of which, coincidentally, are as out of place in an English wood as the Thebans are in Theseus’s royal grove. Moreover, the two men fight like “wilde bores . . . That frothen whit as foom for ire wood. / Up to the ancle foghte they in hir blood” (I.1658-60).56 These images are impossible to reconcile with the chivalric ordering that has previously taken place. The Thebans thus map the masculine rules of warfare onto the natural space of the grove. Indeed, the reshaping of the helpless grove into an improvised but premeditated dueling ground suggests that ordered preparations for such masculine conflict simply mask the base nature of such brutality.

The grove not only has been disturbed by man’s political anxiety and romantic desire, it has also been betrayed by the promise of chivalry and violated by the animalistic fighting of the

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56 None of the animal references are found in the Teseida’s rendering of this duel. Lines 1638-48 are probably from a much earlier segment of the Thebaid (IV.494-99) or a later section of the Teseida (VII.106) during the tournament, while the comparison of the men to wild boars is found in the description of the tournament in both the Thebaid (X1.530-31) and the Teseida (VII.119). See Rudd, 55, for the assertion that these comparisons to animals are “debasing.”
two young men.57 As Arcite and Palamon exert their aggression on each other, their violence extends to the natural space as the damage to the human bodies threatens to extend to the trees of the grove. In the opening analogy likening the fight to that between human hunters and the lion or bear, the Knight notes that the charging animal attacks, “russhyng in the greves / And breketh bothe bowes and the leves” (I.1641-42). Borrowing the simile from Boccaccio’s description of the tournament later in the source, Chaucer places the destructive action in the forest to indicate the measure of turmoil provoked by the Theban’s fight.58 This relocation increases the sense of human aggression on the grove. The hostility is not merely symbolic. The weapons that have been brought to the previously safe place encroach on the native inhabitants, the ancient trees: “The brighte swerdes wenten to and fro / So hidously that with the leest strook / It semed as it wolde felle an ook” (I.1700-1702). These lines find no parallel in the Teseida, which is not surprising since Chaucer’s source does not highlight any conflict between man and nature at this point in the narrative. Furthermore, while apparently no enduring damage is done to the grove, the fighting threatens the stability of the grove and its very existence, initiating the human aggression against nature that will end later in the narrative with the grove’s destruction.

Men in the Knight’s Tale wage their conflicts at the expense of the innocent, and by associating trees with the most vulnerable characters throughout his Tale, Chaucer suggests that the royal grove represents the weakest or most pitiable members of an oppressive society. This is not a new technique for the poet. For instance, in Troilus and Criseyde, the poet compares Troilus’s sadness over the loss of Criseyde to a tree’s loss of leaves in the winter that results in the plant’s nakedness: “And as in wynter leues ben birafte, / Ech after other til the tree be bare, / So that ther nys but bark and braunche i-lafte, / Lith Troil” (IV.225-31). Elsewhere in the

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57 See also Rudd, 53-57, for an analysis of the duel in connection with the grove.
58 Teseida VII.119.
Canterbury Tales, the Man of Law compares Constance, one of the most pathetic characters of Chaucer’s oeuvre, to a silent tree: “she, for sorwe, as doumb stant as a tree, / So was hir herte shet in hir distresse, / Whan she remembred his vnkyndenes” (II.1055-57). These analogies position trees as unwavering entities that are subject to loss and voicelessness. Similarly, in the Knight’s Tale, the material grove becomes like one of Theseus’s vulnerable subjects, watching in disbelief as events unfold around it.

Chaucer sharpens the connection between the royal grove and the weakest characters of Theseus’s world by describing the feuding Thebans and the impotent Emelye as trees. The poet compares Palamon and Arcite, prisoners of war, love, and fortune, to lifeless plants. The imprisoned Palamon, jealous that Arcite has been freed, is like “[t]he boxtree or the asshen dede and colde” (I.1302), a simile which prompts Rudd’s remark that “trees come off particularly badly in this tale; even when they appear as elements of rhetorical colour only, they are deployed in an unsympathetic manner.”59 If this representation is unsympathetic, however, it is so not to the trees in their natural state but to the way in which mankind has altered the living trees. It is difficult to deny that the analogy aptly describes the state of the Thebans. Accordingly, the Knight equates Palamon’s miserable situation with that of Arcite using similar analogies. Now free in Thebes but unable to see his love Emelye, Arcite suffers emotional distress leading to his physical collapse. He cannot sleep, eat, or drink, and he grows lean, hollow-eyed, and pale-faced. The text compares him to a “shaft” and “asshen colde” to depict the futility of his condition:

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\begin{align*}
\text{His slep, his mete, his drynke, is hym biraft,} \\
\text{That lene he wex and drye as is a shaft;} \\
\text{His eyen holwe and grisly to biholde,} \\
\text{His hewe falow and pale as asshen colde,} \\
\text{And solitarie he was and evere allone . . .}
\end{align*}
\]

(I.1351-65)

59 Rudd, 51. Rudd argues that for Chaucer, trees are important only for human use.
The Knight’s reference to Arcite as a dead shaft, cold ash, or the ash tree not only harkens back to the analogy comparing Palamon to a dead boxtree or ash, but it also looks forward to the later destruction of the grove. The reference also foreshadows Arcite’s own death and funeral pyre, where he will be “burned to asshen colde” (I.2957). The power of these metaphors arises from the fact that despite their noble ancestry, the Theban cousins are as vulnerable in Theseus’s world as are trees in the world of man.

While Emelye’s depiction is certainly more appealing than that of the Theban cousins, like the grove her own potency in an authoritarian system is largely limited to her place as an object of masculine desire and her regenerative powers. The Theban cousins are described as somewhat homely or withered trees—or the byproducts of a tree’s destruction. This imagery provides a stark contrast to the moment when Chaucer describes Emelye as “fresshe” (I.1068) and beautiful. Emelye makes a flower garland in the garden “ful of braunches grene” (I.1067), she is “clothed al in grene” (I.1686) for hunting trip, and she wears “a couroune of a grene ook cerial / Upon hir heed” (I.2290-91) when she prays to Diana “of the wodes grene” (I.2297) for chastity. Vegetation imagery thus compellingly depicts the woman as a vibrant and thriving entity associated with Diana.60 Although her beauty results in the fight between Arcite and Palamon, and her marriage to Palamon unites the Thebans and Greeks, her agency is passive. Like the grove, she is at the mercy of the fighting Palamon and Arcite, who fail to recognize the precarious position in which they have placed Emelye. Like the grove, ultimately she is under Theseus’s total control.

In its first appearance as Palamon and Arcite’s hideout and dueling location, Chaucer’s grove corresponds to the most helpless subjects in a totalitarian government, reflecting and even

intensifying masculine desire and ambition but powerless to relieve these emotions. In contrast to the outlaws of *Gamelyn*, who despite their weapons live at harmony and peace in the forest, the behavior of Palamon and Arcite in Chaucer’s grove does little to invoke the reader’s sympathy: it disturbs the tranquility of the space, threatens its existence with their fighting, and jeopardizes the stability of Athens. In the polemic of royal forest law, Chaucer takes the side of the monarch, with some reservations, whereas the *Tale of Gamelyn* affirms the ability of dispossessed commoners to occupy wooded areas and ultimately allows the monarch to recognize this ability.

Within the controversy of his day, Chaucer upholds the king’s power to govern such natural spaces as the grove. However, the narrator offers a more ambivalent view of Theseus when he turns his hand to the destruction of nature. In the grove’s final scene, Theseus, the man in the position to be the grove’s greatest champion, ultimately becomes its greatest foe.

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**The Grove as Funeral Pyre**

But how the fyr was maked upon highte,  
Ne eek the names that the trees highte,  
As ook, firre, birch, aspe, alder, holm, popler,  
Wylugh, elm, plane, assh, box, chasteyn, lynde, laurer,  
Mapul, thorn, bech, hasel, ew, whippeltree—  
How they weren feld shal nat be toold for me;  
Nehou the goddes ronnen up and doun  
Disherited of hire habitacioun,  
In which they woneden in reste and pees,  
Nymphes, fawnes and amadrideds;  
Nehou the beestes and the briddes alle  
Fledden for fere, whan the wode was falle  
Ne how the ground agast was of the light,  
That was nat wont to seen the sonne bright . . .

(1.2919-2932)

The destruction of such a large variety of trees to create Arcite’s funeral pyre, extended through this lengthy sentence, slows the reader’s progress through the narrative and incites a
feeling of deep uneasiness about the events of the poem. The grove’s final literary demise is often understood as an example of *occupatio* or *praeteritio*—an expressed reluctance to narrate—and, it is argued, so helps characterize the Knight and his narrative agenda. Indeed, it seems odd that the Knight articulates unwillingness to narrate the destruction of the Athenian grove for Arcite’s funeral but readily identifies the victims, enumerates the environmental consequences of the felling, and tersely points out the final product of the massive pyre: “Arcite is bren to ashen colde” (I.2957). That the Knight uses *occupatio* is hardly surprising, since the rhetorical technique is one of “Chaucer’s two favorite methods of abbreviation.” 61 It is remarkable though that the experienced warrior proceeds to describe the annihilation of the grove with more specificity than the events of the two battles that foreground the story—“the grete bataille for the nones / Bitwixen Athenes and Amazones” (I.879-80) and the “pleyn bataille” (I.988) between Athens and Thebes.

Although the Knight neither condemns the grove’s use as the king’s hunting ground nor pauses to consider how it is first destroyed to make way for the amphitheater, his description of the grove’s destruction for Arcite’s funeral pyre cited above articulates some discomfort at Theseus’s almost personal attack on the grove. 62 When the duke’s control fails at the tournament—he wants no blood shed in the fight for Emelye, but Arcite dies—he carefully (“with all his bisy cure,” I.2853) chooses the grove for Arcite's burial place. His decision to eliminate the grove—for the second time—associates the space once again with unrestrained desire. For Theseus, the “swoote and grene” (I.2860) grove is the womb in which Arcite’s passion develops. The space, the Knight suggests, accommodates Arcite’s passion and even

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stimulates the “hoote fires” (I.2862) of the dangerous emotion. Therefore, by Theseus’s logic, a
fire that destroys the sweet, green grove is a fitting “conclusioun”:

And at the laste he took conclusioun
That ther as first Arcite and Palamoun
Hadden for love the bataille hem bitwene,
That in that selve grove, swoote and grene,
Ther as he hadde his amorouse desires,
His compleynete, and for love his hoote fires,
He wolde make a fyr in which the office
Funeral he myghte al accomplice.

(I.2857-64)

The grove of Chaucer’s source in this scene is merely an apt burial place, the beginning and end
of Arcite’s love: “he thought that he would have the pyre erected and the funeral rituals
performed in the forest where Arcite would often ponder on his amorous complaints” (XI.13).
Chaucer, however, suggests that Theseus blames the warfare between Arcite and Palamon more
directly on the grove, almost as if the grove’s destruction by fire might prevent further dangerous
emotion from spreading. Theseus’s subject grove has failed in its purposes (as envisioned by the
Duke): first, as the site of the royal hunt, and second, as a political solution to the feud between
Palamon and Arcite vis-à-vis the tourney ground.

Additionally, the reality of the grove’s destruction in the Knight’s Tale seems more than a
symbolic end to Arcite’s passion since the destruction of the grove is so merciless and personal.
In the Teseida, Theseus does not destroy the grove. Rather, it is the site of the cremation.
Chaucer, by contrast, locates the trees to be burned within the grove, linking the destruction of
the grove thematically to the fight between Arcite and Palamon in order to remind us of
Theseus’s power. Whereas the duel “semes as it wolde felle an ook” (I.1702), Theseus
devastates the entire grove. His command, "to hakke and hewe the okes olde” (I.2865-66), calls
attention to the very quality for which medieval writers admire trees, their longevity. This feature figures in the lines of the duke’s “Firste Moevere” speech:

Loo the ook, that hath so long a norisshynge
From tyme that it first bigynneth to sprynge,
And hath so long a lif, as we may see,
Yet at the laste wasted is the tree.

(I.3017-20)

Theseus comes to see the “okes olde” as a model for the human existence, but his earlier command reminds us that he has also been the agent of these oaks' destruction. After all, he does not allow them to die a natural death. Moreover, the action he commands, “to hakke and hewe,” employs a rhetoric of violence more appropriate to the battlefield than the clearing of a grove.63

The description of the clearing, cited at the chapter’s opening, reveals the Knight’s discomfort with the grove’s treatment. It has contained and concealed a political threat in Palamon, has stirred Arcite’s ambition and lust, has been the source of Theseus’s entertainment and sport, and has even been replaced once with the amphitheater. All of these uses the Knight takes in stride. But even he grows impatient with Theseus’s decision to lay it waste—the chivalric and heroic necessity of an appropriate funeral a rather meaningless gesture in the end.

Chaucer forces us to examine the sense of loss and waste created by his longest sentence (I.2919-2962), in which the Knight identifies twenty-one varieties of trees that are destroyed to construct Arcite's burial pyre. In the Teseida, Boccaccio employs lengthy descriptions of the trees hewn to create Arcite’s funeral pyre, but Chaucer rather carefully reduces his source to a catalog of the trees that are destroyed. Piero Boitani, who has examined medieval tree-lists to demonstrate Boccaccio and Chaucer’s use of their sources, summarizes Chaucer’s alterations: “the number of trees has become considerably greater in a much more concentrated space . . . all

63 See Rudd, 62-63, for another analysis of the grove’s violent destruction.
the adjectives and attributes have been eliminated . . . four new trees have been introduced.” In short, Chaucer has taken pains to describe the funeral pyre using an extremely compact but extensive catalogue of trees within an excessively long sentence, a clerical rendering of the type the poet would have been accustomed to as controller in the Port of London and later as clerk of the works.

Chaucer’s rapid listing and elimination of the description found in the Boccaccio passage heightens the sense of devastation and waste to the grove. Eliminating the trees’ attributes is a major change to the text and a radical departure from the “functional role of arboreal attributes” the poet invented in his *Parliament of Fowls* catalogue. In this earlier work, the lovely garden offers a prelapsarian and ideal view of nature—green trees of all varieties, a garden along a river in a meadow, temperate air, no sickness or age, “joye more a thousandfold / Than man can telle.” In this vision of perfected nature, the dreamer is delighted to see “treës clad with leves that ay shal laste, / Ech in his kynde, of colour fresh and greene / As emeraude, that joye was to seene” (173-75). Chaucer proceeds to list fourteen types of trees along with epithets describing the purpose of each. Moreover, fully a third of these apparently are original:

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64 Piero Boitani, “Chaucer and Lists of Trees,” *Reading Medieval Studies* 2 (1976): 28-44, at 35. See page 39, note 4 to Table I, for a specific comparison of the list in the *Knight’s Tale* to those in *Parliament of the Fowls*, Boccaccio, Statius, and Ovid.

65 For more specific information on these positions, see *Chaucer Life-Records*, chapters nine and twenty-one, respectively.

66 Rudd acknowledges that the passage has the “effect of reckless destruction” (62) and “flagrant waste” (63) but denies that this effect is intentional. The Knight’s refusal to deliberate on the uses of the trees while listing of the names of each variety seems to challenge Rudd’s assertion that Chaucer sees trees solely as material and rhetorical resources (67). In this passage, the trees are significant as individual, living entities, and their destruction fuels a dubious purpose.

67 Boitani, 35.

68 *Riverside Chaucer*, lines 208-209, hereafter parenthetically cited by line number.

69 Specifically, epithets for the oak, elm, holm-oak, yew, and aspen are not found in other sources [Charles Muscatine, “Explanatory Notes to *The Parliament of Fowls*,” in *Riverside Chaucer*, 997, note to lines 172-82].
The byldere ok, and ek the hardy asshe;
The piler elm, the cofre unto carayne;
The boxtre pipere, holm to whippes lashe;
The saylynge fyr; the cipresse, deth to playne;
The shetere ew; the asp for shaftes pleyne;
The olyve of pes, and eke the dronke vyne;
The victor palm, the laurer to devyne.

(176-182)

Having successfully used the economy of a list before, packing a large number of trees into only a few lines, it is doubtful that Chaucer now would eliminate his source’s detailed listing of the tree’s uses solely for the utility and pacing of the narrative.\textsuperscript{70}

I submit that the Knight’s refusal to reflect on the alternative uses for these trees is emblematic of the “slash-and-burn” style of warfare waged by Theseus and other autocratic rulers of whom Chaucer is critical. The rapid listing of the trees and their demise point to the capricious whims of a king and the brutal effects of war. In the arbitrary realm of such a government, there seems no contemplation of anything other than the urgent demands ultimately brought on by the cyclical, retaliation-driven nature of war. Thus, there is no time to consider how the trees might have been used otherwise, and there is no time for the Knight to think through the consequences and the real effect of the casualties. Instead, he only has a moment to list the victims and then run through the effects of the grove’s destruction. Moreover, the bare listing of the trees in the \textit{Knight's Tale} speeds up the pace of violence, the short order in which man devastates this grove. Its total destruction is reminiscent of the Theban bodies felled in Theseus’s capricious war with Creon.

One connection to that war in the grove’s destruction scene is the lack of consideration for the displacement that occurs because of Theseus’s attack on the grove. The nymphs and fauns are “disherited of hire habitacioun” (I.2926) in which they previously had lived “in reste and

\textsuperscript{70} Boitani, 35.
pees” (I.2927); the animals and birds flee “for fere” (I.2930). Even the ground is personified, frightened of the light from which the trees formerly protected it. This situation parallels the Tale’s opening in which the Theban women in mourning have been grieved by war. Theseus perpetuates the conflict by going to war with those aggressors. Theseus’s battle with Creon kills many knights, forces the people to flee, and destroys the town, all in order to restore dead bodies to the Theban women:

With Creon, which that was of Thebes kyng,
He fought, and slough hym many as a knyght
In pleyn bataille, and putte the folk to flyght;
And by assaut he wan the citee after,
And rente adoun bothe wall and sparre and rafter;
And to the ladyes he restored agayn
The bones of hir freenes that were slayn . . .

(I.986-992)

The irony, that Theseus creates a new “taas [heap] of bodyes dede” (I.1005) to bury the bodies that have been destroyed in the previous wave of battle, goes unnoticed by the Knight. The grove, however, seems a safer and more distant subject. The grove mimics Theseus’s actions against Creon, the “okes olde” destroyed to achieve the burial of one, already dead, body. The final result? “Arcite is brent to asshen colde” (I.2957). This type of assessment is more to be expected in Chaucer’s business accounts or records than his poetry, but the clerical presentation and analysis of the situation coolly (and effectively) appraises the situation: twenty-one trees decimated for a dead hero.

By circumspectly presenting the trees in the grove as the helpless subjects of an autocratic system, Chaucer critiques the material effects of empire-building. If Theseus’s system threatens the last bastion of peace and logical sensibilities, that is, nature, then how much more devastating are its effects on those it immediately seeks to conquer? Here, Elizabeth Fowler’s concept of dominion in the Knight’s Tale is useful in the consideration of Theseus’s destruction
of his own royal grove. Fowler proposes that the *Tale* explores the opposing aspects of a
government established through conquest. 71 Although Theseus, she argues, is “a benevolent
holder of an absolute dominion,” his regime has serious limits: “dominion by conquest is
incapable of civilizing. It can command, it can revenge, it can take, it can bring the half-dead to
life and the half-living to death, but it is incapable of compelling consent and conjuring
community in any meaningful interpretation of the terms.” 72 Fowler does not consider the role of
the grove in the *Tale*, but she advances the argument beyond a discussion of Theseus himself to a
consideration of the *Tale*’s political system. Chaucer demonstrates limitations in the imperialistic
regime of the *Knight’s Tale* through the categorical destruction of the grove.

In the context of royal forest law, the *Tale* accepts Theseus’s dominion over people and
places while simultaneously exposing the inherent danger of such power. This dichotomy is
found in the “endless cycle of magnate violence” and the “darkening of the poetic register” that
coexist with Theseus’s “moderate rather than tyrannical” rule. 73 The grove’s inability to soothe
or relieve masculine desire is not a failure of the grove but a failure of men to listen to the voices
of the most helpless members of Theseus’s society including the natural space of the grove. 74
The failure extends not just to Theseus but also to the other men of the *Tale*, that is to say,
Palamon and Arcite, who listen neither to Emelye’s wishes nor to the soothing impulse of the
grove that is so explicit in Boccaccio. Indeed, the *Tale* does not embrace the revolutionary
impulse found in the *Tale of Gamelyn* or the Robin Hood legends precisely because it presents

(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 124-42.
72 Ibid., 131 and 133, respectively.
73 David Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity: Absolutist Lineages and Associational Forms in England and Italy* (Stanford:
74 Wallace sees Theseus’s major problem as a failure to listen and learn from women in this “darkly masculinist”
tale (106).
flaws in a governmental system as not unique to an authoritarian regime, but rather universal to mankind.

In the Knight’s Tale, man’s relationship to the grove reveals a style of warfare that fails to weigh the costs of destruction and shortcomings in despotic systems of government, both of which can be traced to deep-seated flaws in human nature. The Knight passes over the first destruction of the grove for the purpose of building the theater because the production of the amphitheater has utilitarian use, to contain and resolve the feud between Arcite and Palamon. In contrast, the second destruction enumerates the catalogue of trees to remind us that ultimately the grove’s demise is meaningless, much like the wars of Theseus’s regime.

Chaucer is not, however, only pessimistic about the grove’s destruction but introduces a note of optimism regarding autocratic political systems through the rhetoric of the grove. A hint at man’s potential to learn from the grove is found early on in the Tale and in the Tale’s continued juxtaposition of Mars with Diana. When the duke first rides to the grove, the Knight remarks, “For after Mars he serveth now Dyane” (I.1682). Mars’s temple features a barren forest “In which ther dwelleth neither man ne best, / With knotty, knarry, bareyne trees olde, / Of stubbes sharpe and hidouse to biholde, / In which ther ran a rumbel in a swough / As though a storm sholde bresten every bough” (I.1976-80). Diana’s image, in contrast, is reminiscent of Theseus’s royal grove (where the duke serves the goddess). Clothed in green, Diana sits on a hart with hounds at her feet. The desolate image of Mars’ barren forest, juxtaposed against Diana’s temple and the major setting of the lovely grove, condemns man’s service of Mars. Kings might be better off in the service of Diana than Mars, Chaucer suggests. In his final turn to Emelye, Diana’s servant, for assistance in forging a new alliance with Thebes, Theseus exercises a non-combative solution to his political problems for the first time.
There is hope also for the subjects of an autocratic government, and that is through the ideals and the agency that allow the grove to flourish despite its one-time destruction for the tournament. The text demands its reader pay attention to the lessons of the grove found in its cycle of listening and silence, acceptance, regeneration, and rebirth. One of these lessons is the potential of time to change the landscape. We see this in Chaucer’s addition of years between the destruction of the grove and the meeting of parliament that ends with Palamon and Emelye’s marriage. In the *Teseida*, only “several days had passed beyond the unfortunate events” (XII.3)—days which include Palamon’s building of a commemorative temple on the site of Arcite’s pyre. In the *Knight’s Tale*, though, years pass after Arcite’s death and the annihilation of the grove—time in which, thanks to coppicing, the grove will begin to replace itself, since the trees are felled and not uprooted, and time that affords Theseus the opportunity to ponder his own responsibility as sovereign within a larger cosmic universe.75

Time offers healing and acceptance, and years must pass before Theseus’s subjects are prepared to act on the resignation modeled through the life of the old oaks, that like Arcite have been a victim of the human cycle of chivalric violence and resolution. Theseus’s “Firste Moevere” speech about making a virtue of necessity reminds the reader that one of the admirable characteristics of the oak tree is its longevity, its ability to effectively utilize its environment for nourishment and survival despite the certainty that it will one day pass away.

Loo the ook, that hath so long a norisshynge
From tyme that it first bigynneth to sprynge,
And hath so long a lif, as we may see
Yet at the laste wasted is the tree.

(I.3017-20)

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75 See Halverson, especially at 616, for a reading of Theseus as representative of social order.
The *Teseida* also includes this bit of wisdom: “The oak trees that have such a long subsistence and great life span, as we see, must also come to an end sometime” (XII.7). Other than the more vivid imagery of the tree’s beginning, the most radical difference is that Chaucer has placed more focus on oak trees previously by locating old oak trees in the grove destroyed prematurely by Theseus. This alteration links the closing speech back to the grove and the significant events that occur there. At the very least, the reference to the old oak tree suggests that the natural life cycle of the tree is in fact superior to the chivalric cycle perpetuated by the duke’s social order. If the value of existence (whether human, animal, or plant) is found in its endurance and resilience, then the chivalric principles—that he (and the Knight) have embraced—are deeply flawed. Whether or not Theseus has actually assimilated the lessons of the grove—lessons that by contrast offer as much to say about human nature and the limitations of authoritarian power as about trees—it is clear that the reemerging grove offers a model of survival and pragmatism.

In Chaucer’s three scenes featuring the grove, the politicization of the wood is consistent with four centuries of medieval forest law, its tensions allegorizing the delicate balance between the king and his subjects. Consistent with medieval forest law’s reading of nature as a subject for the king’s pleasure and contradictory to the *Tale*’s source that romanticizes the space, the Knight depicts the grove as a highly charged political location that kindles human desire rather than a place that relieves it. Its two resurrections, first after being destroyed to create the amphitheater and then via the lesson of the oak tree at the end of the *Tale*, suggest a model for political subjects and a corrective to Theseus’s use of destructive force: that is, the power of nature to model both potent subjecthood and political policy.

By deepening the association between trees and people and adding a socio-political dimension to the grove, the *Tale* asserts that men are incapable of lasting harmony, but they can
use nature to attempt political reconciliation and certainly should look to nature as a model for the political structures and decisions they adopt. More importantly, as representative of a vulnerable subject in a tense political situation, the grove offers power to the people, not by forcing change on others, but by modeling its own embrace of a less visible but still potent agency in order to survive despite its own subjection.
CONCLUSION

[It is not that far from here
in measure by miles, that the mere stands.
Over that, groves hang covered with frost.
The wood with fixed roots overshadows the water.]

Chaucer’s grove in the late fourteenth-century *Knight’s Tale* shares little similarity to the
ominous woods of the ninth or tenth-century *Beowulf*, and yet the Old English poem has
contributed to the notion that medieval people across the period viewed wooded areas as
dangerous and chaotic places.\(^2\) My dissertation challenges this notion. Certainly, the *Beowulf*
poet’s attention to detail in the “great set-piece symbolic landscape of Old English poetry”\(^3\)
exhibits the passage’s importance. As Beowulf and his group march along the *waldswapum*
(“forest-paths,” 1403) to the place where the murderous Grendel and his mother live, the pace of
the lines accelerates.\(^4\) At the wood, which marks the beginning of at least limited sanctuary for
society’s outcasts, characterizing the boundary between civilized society and the animalistic or
monstrous, the tempo slows to allow the reader to ponder the dismal trees leaning over gray
stone and churning water:

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2. For example, see pages 7-8, 22-24, and 148 above.
4. Starting with line 1408, the sentence consists of a complete two-word phrase for each verse, or half-line, until line 1412, when the group reaches the wooded area.
[until he suddenly found mountain-trees
leaning over grey stone,
a joyless wood; the water stood underneath
bloody and churning.]

The pacing of the passage and the barbarous discovery of the head of Æscher, in conjunction
with the location, suggests that the troop has reached the point that separates the figurative kin of
Seth (the Danes and Scyldings) with what the poet has explicitly labeled the kin of Cain. The
joyless wood thus helps the reader contemplate the situation of the Anglo-Saxons, one that
Tolkien famously describes as the “pregnant moment of poise” between the pagan past and a
Christian present, a point of “fusion” between old and new.5 Marking the boundary between
good and evil, the forest’s cheerless presence reminds the reader of the torment that lies on the
other side of that borderline.

This passage, because of its familiarity, understandably would lead the reader of
medieval English texts to imagine that uncultivated trees and landscapes were by and large seen
by medieval literary communities as at worst, hellish, and at best, as “wild nature (a negative
thing).”6 Trees and wooded areas, however, are largely seen as positive entities through the
period, which contributes to the depiction of the cross as a forest tree—living, speaking, healing,
blessing—worthy of respect, honor, and even veneration in The Dream of the Rood, to the way


6 Salisbury, Joyce, ed., The Medieval World of Nature: A Book of Essays (New York: Garland, 1993), xi. See also Pearsall and Salter, who note the horrific nature of the passage, its associations with the “hell landscape” of the Blickling Homilies, and “the medieval Christian tendency to polarize all landscape into symbols of heaven and hell” (44).
in which the grove of *The Knight's Tale* becomes a model for rulers and subjects. The medieval period offers an array of rhetorical approaches to trees. Thus, the horrific nature of the *Beowulf* depiction cannot be attached to other medieval works in answering questions like how, and in what context, do medieval writers speak about and relate to trees, what techniques are used to construct trees in medieval literature, and how trees relate to English patterns of thinking about nature, society, and other abstract concepts.

The passage is useful, however, in answering these ecocritical questions about *Beowulf* itself. Moreover, its use of the wooded area as a boundary marker—a set point delineating the demarcation between civilized and uncivilized, a geographical point of reference by which medieval English men and women might forge their own sense of identity—is corroborated by the primary works examined in this dissertation. The tree in *The Dream of the Rood* helps the medieval reader identify with the cross and Christ as the Christian works through the transformational process associated with Christianity. In the Junius manuscript, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil allows the *Genesis A* and *B* poets and manuscript illustrator to ponder the role of God, Satan, male, and female in the Fall as well as to scrutinize the Anglo-Saxon Christian’s relationship and responsibility to God in its aftermath.

By and large, the majority of tree representations within English vernacular literature employ allegory in a search for the Christian identity. Thus, in a passage from “The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost” that supports his admonition not to worship the wood of the cross, Ælfric carefully draws out the figurative meaning of the good and evil trees of the New Testament parable. He emphasizes that material trees are without life, without soul, and without sense, and therefore they themselves are incapable of producing good or evil. Rather, the trees refer to rational men who choose to do either good or evil:
Ælc góð treow wyrcð góde wæstmas, and yfel treow wyrcð yfele wæstmas. Ne mænde ure drihten mid þisum wordum ða treowa þe on æppeltune wexað, þa ðe sind lifleæse, sawulleæse, andandgitleæse. Ac þurh heora híw he gebicnode þa gesceadwisan men ðe andgit habbað, and be agenum willan wyrcað swa góð swa yfel.⁷

[Each good tree produces good fruits, and an evil tree produces evil fruits. With these words our Lord did not mean the trees that grow in a fruit garden, those which are lifeless, soulless, and senseless. But through their form he signified those rational men who have understanding, and by their own will work either good or evil.]

Ælfric’s “lifeless, soulless, and senseless” trees are far from the vibrant, engaged, active physical trees discussed in the poetry of chapter two, and yet, as trees are transformed into complex allegories in works like Genesis B and The Parson’s Tale, the symbolic representations retain the organic, natural processes of material trees to offer readers a visual picture of the Christian interior—the heart.

With the emergence of new social categories in the late Middle Ages, the rhetoric of trees moves beyond what it means to forge a Christian identity to consider the role of a ruler and his subjects, the meaning of nature, and the place of women in society. In Chaucer’s Knight’s Tale, therefore, the poet utilizes forest law to work out the meaning of a wooded area as it intersects with policy. The grove exposes the limitations of government and masculine control while modeling a positive response to authoritative policy and subjection.

Much work on the subject of trees in medieval English literature remains to be done. These chapters briefly touch on the Old English poetic corpus and, of necessity, omit discussion of significant references in such poems as Andreas, Daniel, Wulf and Eadwacer, and The Phoenix. Although I have briefly connected Eve to the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil through her consumption of the fruit in Genesis B, the female speaker in The Wife’s Lament with an oak tree, and Emelye and the feminine with the grove in The Knight’s Tale, more analysis of

⁷ CHII 26.47-52.
trees in connection with gender is needed. Trees in the literature of the late Middle Ages, in particular, offer an abundance of material for a consideration of gender, class, and the role of the Church as it relates to the laity. Critics interested in the subject might turn to Malory, as does Gillian Rudd, for further discussion, or look to Chaucer. For example, Chaucer uses a pear tree in *The Merchant’s Tale* to carve out a gendered space that empowers the female and to subtly condemn a church that condones, even blesses, marriage for any other reason than love. The tree becomes an alternative space to the marital bed that offers May some autonomy and temporary freedom from patriarchal control.

As James Fernandez claims, people who live in or near wooded regions develop a connection to trees that results in a “sense of similarity between trees and themselves and trees and their body social and body politic.” Although England’s landscape has changed over time, this “sense of similarity” is etched into the extant texts that remain. Given the importance of trees in medieval England and its manuscripts, further examination of the material culture of trees as it intersects with the rhetoric of trees in medieval English literature will, like the productive trees of Ælfric’s prose, *wyrcð gode wæstmas* (“work good fruit”) in the field.

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