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NEW APPROACHES TO MEDIEVAL WATER STUDIES

Fluid Boundaries in *The Awntyrs off Arthure* and *Sir Isumbras*

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Encounters with water shape the Middle English romances of *The Awntyrs off Arthure* and *Sir Isumbras*. In the latter, rivers and the 'Greek Sea' serve to distinguish separate sections of the narrative: the river marks the point at which the titular hero's family unit begins to break down, while the beach of the sea marks the lowest point of his social power. Yet his later traversal of the Greek Sea itself allows him to reassemble his family and reclaim his aristocratic power. In *Awntyrs*, the Tarn Wathelene (or Wadling) ties the actions of the romance's first episode onto a specific spot in the real-world English landscape, while connecting the text to a number of other Arthurian romances that also mention or take place near the tarn. This article, then, argues that the waterscapes in these two texts illustrate a late-medieval understanding of tarns, rivers, and seas as explicitly alien, yet intimately physical embodiments of divine power in the natural world. Taken together, these poems—one a metrical romance, the other alliterative—show how interests in waterscapes crossed boundaries within the muddy genre of romance itself, and reveal that water upsets such human categories as family and property. Tarns, rivers, and seas turn human bodies, instead, into their possessions; the disturbing experience of that dehumanizing process should, these texts imply, wear the world, its history, and its bonds away, until even the greatest knights or ladies are left alone with watery forms beyond the pale of human understanding.

Introduction

Encounters with water shape the Middle English romances of *The Awntyrs off Arthure* and *Sir Isumbras*. In the latter, rivers and the ‘Greek Sea’ serve to distinguish separate sections of the narrative: the river marks the point at which the titular hero’s family unit begins to break down, as his children are stolen by animals, while the beach of the sea marks the lowest point of his social power, as his wife is stolen from him by raiders, who beat him to a pulp before the eyes of his one remaining child. Yet this seashore also provides the space wherein Isumbras, through becoming a blacksmith and then a self-made knight, works his way back up the social hierarchy—an ascent culminating in his traversal of the Greek Sea itself, in order to reassemble his family and earn back his aristocratic power. In *Awntyrs*, the Tarn Wathelene (or Wadling) ties the actions of the romance’s first episode—an encounter with an undead apparition—onto a specific spot in the real-world English landscape (a small lake in Cumberland). At the same time, this setting connects the text to a number of other Arthurian romances that also mention or take place near the tarn.¹ Taken together, these romances illustrate the range of ways in which Middle English romances use waterscapes to frame encounters with divine or supernatural forces, all while linking such episodes back to the complicated relationship of contemporary readers to real-world bodies of water.

This article, then, argues that the waterscapes in these two texts illustrate a late-medieval understanding of tarns, rivers, and seas as explicitly alien, yet intimately physical embodiments of divine power in the natural world. Water in these texts presents situations, characters, and powers that evoke associations with the divine (or the demonic) and dwarf the experiences and capabilities of even the most heroic human characters. Simultaneously, however, these same bodies of water push the texts towards explicit concentrations on familial bonds, especially those of parent-to-child

¹ As Hahn (1995: 202) observes, this tarn ‘was renowned out of all proportion to its size as a site for Arthurian adventure’, and is specifically mentioned in *Awntyrs* (l. 2), *The Avowing of Arthur* (ll. 131, 338), and *The Marriage of Sir Gawain* (l. 32); it is also alluded to in descriptions of a setting in Inglewood Forest for *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* (l. 16) and *The Greene Knight* (l. 493). Editions of all of these texts can be found in Hahn (1995).

and spouse-to-spouse. The literary waterscapes thus wash away the sediment of secondary interests in these narratives, leaving bare the central priorities of family and religious duty. While *Awntyrs'* encounter stands in many ways as remarkably unique in the romance tradition, particularly in terms of its anthropomorphic embodiment of the naturalistic and supernatural meanings attached to water in romances, *Isumbras* illustrates the more concentrated understandings of water common to many of the popular romances, tracing as it does the narrative of a family unit separated and then, through great trials, reunited. The latter text thus provides an apt example of how such popular texts sought to simplify the complex issues associated with water in *Awntyrs*. Yet these two romances share a pronounced focus on waterscapes as the manifestations of divine power that most directly demands an admission of the limitations of human control over the physical world, that places the fate of the central earthly bond—family—in the hands of nature. In effect, these episodes reverse the obsession with the demarcation, ownership, and inheritance of landed property that so permeates Middle English verse romances and instead reveal that liquid topographies upset such human categories. Water, then, turns the human body into its possession; the disturbing experience of that dehumanizing process should, these texts imply, wear the world, its history, and its bonds away, until even the greatest knights or ladies are left alone with watery forces beyond the pale of human understanding.

Awntyrs off Arthure was fairly popular for an alliterative romance, surviving in four manuscripts of the 15th-century (Hahn, 1995: 174–5).² The poem presents two episodes roughly similar in length, both tied to King Arthur: in the first, a morning storm occurs during a hunt, leading Gawain and Guinevere to become separated from the rest of court. Coming upon the Tarn Wathelene, they encounter a ghost-corpse,

² On the manuscript witnesses to the text, including romance collections and broader miscellanies, see Hahn (1995: 174–5) and especially Guddat-Figge's discussions of: Princeton University Library, MS Taylor 9 (the 'Ireland Blackburn MS'); Lincoln Cathedral Library, MS 91 (the 'Thornton MS'); London, Lambeth Palace Library, MS 491; and Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 324 (1976: 131–2, 135–42, 226–8, and 292–5). For a discussion of the popularity of the romance, as illustrated by its spread to a variety of different manuscripts produced well afield from the poem's presumably Carlisle-based origins, see for instance Lowe (1980: 199–200).

who turns out to be Guinevere's mother; after foretelling the fall of Arthur, she retreats back into the tarn, and Guinevere and Gawain rejoin the court. In the second episode, a tournament is held to settle a land dispute between a Scottish knight and Gawain; after a bloody fight, the Scottish knight yields, but joins the Round Table, and ends up with some of his lands at the end after all. Most critical readings have sought to explain how these seemingly disparate parts of the poem fit (or fail to fit) together.³ Here, however, I shall focus exclusively on the scene at the tarn, so as to examine *Awntyrs'* complication of water's role in Middle English romance.

In this text, the very opening lines establish the connection between the narrative's legendary timeline and real-world setting, relating that, '[i]n the tyme of Arthur an aunter bytydde,/ [b]y the Turne Wathelan, as the boke telles,/ [w]han he to Carlele was comen, that conquerour kydde,/ [w]ith dukes and dussiperes that with the dere dwelles' (Anon., 1995: 178 [ll. 1–4]).⁴ This initial identification of Arthur as both an outsider and imperialist 'conqueror' emphasizes, as many modern scholars have noted, the decidedly regionalist, English/Scottish border-March perspective of a story obsessed with the (mis)appropriation of land by an alien crown (Schiff, 2009: 100–27; 2011: 110–9), and thus 'explor[ing] the significance of land to sovereignty' (Ingham, 2001: 180) or linking the text to patron Joan Neville, matriarch of the powerful English March lords centered at Carlisle in the early 15th-century (Allen, 1996; 2004).

³ I focus primarily in my analysis of the text on this first half, as I am interested in close-reading the implications of its presentation of the tarn-space. Critical traditions have been divided as to whether the two episodes of the romance—an encounter with a ghost and then a tournament—should be read together or separately, with more recent studies leaning towards the former stance. For an overview of such concerns, and a convincing reading of the formal unity of the entire romance as an accomplished reliquary for both the Arthurian world and the genre of the alliterative romance, see Twu (2003). Despite my current concentration, however, I would suggest that the interests of *Awntyrs'* initial scene in the ability of humans to define, own, and give meaning to land and waterscape features clearly carry over into the poem's second episode as well.

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, citations from *The Awntyrs off Arthure* are taken from Hahn (1995) and thus based on the Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 324 variant. The passages used are cited by line number. Reference will at times be made to the comparative edition of Gates (1969). In the spelling of the poem's title, though, I follow Gates and most other editors by including the final -e.

In addition to ascertaining the poem's contemporary political context, critics have also explored the theological concerns that underpin the first episode especially. As the romance's most recent editor and others have noted, this first half of the poem draws heavily from the *memento mori* and 'impenitent death' traditions becoming increasingly widespread in the late 14th and early 15th centuries (Hahn, 1995: 169; Hanna, 1970: 286–7; Phillips, 1989: 51–2).⁵ Indeed, as Alexander Zawacki (2017) argues, the two episodes of the poem may fit together to form a literary representation of the 'cadaver tomb' embodiment of the *memento mori* tradition, wherein the two episodes of *Awntyrs* show the court in death and life.⁶ In particular, *Awntyrs* builds upon the *Mass or Trental of Saint Gregory* legend, where Pope Gregory is visited by a figure of his mother asking him to pray on behalf of her sins, while also demonstrating the influence of associated 'Adulterous Mother' sermon exempla.⁷ Helen Phillips, for instance, notes that, '[d]espite its cosily localized setting, and its attention to immediate, physical detail, the poem is characterized by a liturgical, almost a sacramental, approach to narrative', wherein '[t]he ghost's descent into the purgatorial lake parallels the baptismal descent' and Christ's journey to and return from Hell (1989: 51, 56). These studies add greatly to our understanding of

⁵ Note, for instance, the nearly contemporary *Fall of Princes* and *Dance of Death (Dance Macabre)* of John Lydgate—in Warren (1971)—as well as Thomas Hoccleve's *Lerne for to Dye* (Hoccleve, 2001). On the latter, see further Simpson's chapter on late medieval English mortuary imagery (2011: 49–83), and also von Nolcken (1993).

⁶ Radulescu also considers the figure of Guinevere's mother as one presented 'in typically medieval *memento mori* fashion', focusing on how the materiality of the corpse's description encourages the audience to consider the liminal boundary between the living and the dead (2016: 32). Additionally, Martin notes the importance of the visual *memento mori* context to the poem, in support of his argument that the poem as a whole ultimately defends the Christian legitimacy of a courtly, aristocratic lifestyle (2010: 178–80).

⁷ Klausner (1972) provides an overview of arguments linking *Awntyrs* to the *Trental* tradition, but also argues at length for the influence of a broader tradition of ghost-adulteress exempla in medieval English sermons. For a concise description of the different Middle English versions of the *Trental*, see further Haught (2010: 21, n. 18). As Haught notes, the toads and serpents attached to the ghost's body could reflect the sins of lechery and pride, while also having associations with demons—all elements that fit well with the *Trental* tradition, although Haught goes on to argue that the complicated details of the *Awntyrs* account do not fall neatly into such easy categories, evoking so many different traditions that the reader is unable to land on one specifically to use in interpreting the scene (2010: 8–9).

the symbolic and cultural interests of this poem, but their concentration on lands and cities as political markers and water as a baptismal metaphor leaves ample room to examine the intriguing relationship between the figure of the apparition and the environmental context of the tarn.⁸ While Jean E. Jost has examined the tarn and its environs as an ‘unnatural, isolated, and grief-wrenching tarn, apart from the real world, physically and psychologically’ (2012: 591),⁹ I would like to add to such readings an exploration of how the Tarn Wathelene of the *Awntyrs* reflects and responds to contemporary conceptions of human relationships with real-world woodland waterscapes (including, for local audiences at least, the actual tarn itself).

In this approach, I build upon the work of Margaret Robson, who argues that ‘the tarn is the most important feature of the tale’ (2000: 222). As Robson convincingly posits, the environment of the real-life tarn would have provided the perfect spot for murderers to dispose of their victims’ bodies. In turn, the conditions of storms (such as the one that begins the poem) could have forced decomposing corpses to the surface of the tarn, leading to encounters with the seemingly risen dead. Moreover, this happenstance would help to provide real-world grounding for the traditional, otherworldly myths and folk-legends of sunken cities, underwater church bells, and ghostly (or demonic) encounters associated with the tarn, which is featured in a large number of Arthurian (often Gawain) romances (Cox, 1974; Hanna, 1970; Hahn, 1995:

⁸ In addition to the secondary works already mentioned, see further: Walking (2003); Breeze (2000), (1999), and (1998); and Kelly (1979).

⁹ Jost’s (2012) reading of the spaces of this romance on a contrast of ‘rural’ tarn and ‘urban’ court, with the battlefield a space between, naturally focuses to a large extent on the events around the tarn as well. However, while she notes that the tarn was a real place, she characterizes it in the romance as both ‘apart from the real world’ (Jost, 2012: 591) and yet also a ‘fairy territory, a land of frightening magical realism’ (Jost, 2012: 592), whose ‘otherworldly nightmare’ is ‘realized’ in the ‘worldly horror’ of the tournament fight from the second half of the poem, where she argues that the blood shed by the knights makes their place of battle into a marshy field reminiscent of the tarn (Jost, 2012: 603–4). For an early version of some of these points, in service of a reading of Guinevere’s mother as a marginal figure whose ‘outsider’ status allows her to assess Arthur’s court, but condemns her warnings to be forgotten, see also Jost (2002: 134–42). While I agree with Jost (2012)’s central claim that investigating descriptions of space is integral to understanding the poem, I focus instead on examining the tarn-mother as an anthropomorphic embodiment of human understandings of the naturalistic (as opposed to solely supernatural) tarn environment, and further how she serves as a bridge for audiences to relate their own experiences to those of the romance.

202).¹⁰ While both original and practical in its reasoning, Robson's reading of the tarn as a place that 'provides, in both its topography and its legends ... in essence, a famous local murder spot' (2000: 225) concentrates almost entirely on the humanness of the figure that rises from the lake to lament and prophesy to Guinevere and Gawain. Yet the connections between this character and the tarn, I would argue, run deeper than that between a corpse and its watery grave. Indeed, since the figure that rises from the tarn identifies itself as Guinevere's mother, and thus a queen in her own right, her burial was almost certainly not located in the tarn itself (although the text does not clarify). The ghost's description of herself as '[w]ith Lucyfer in a lake loogh am I light' (Anon., 1995: 183 [l. 164]), furthermore, suggests that the tarn provides a portal to Hell, emphasizing the otherworldly nature of the apparition (Haught, 2010: 10–11).¹¹ What, then, are readers to make of this spiritually condemned queen rising from a space other than her presumably royal grave, walking out of the spiritual world and onto the recognizably familiar shore of the tarn?

It is this confluence of factors that makes the figure of Guinevere's undead mother so fascinating from an ecocritical perspective. In this episode, the text combines the royal figure common to many *memento mori* narratives with a waterscape that audiences are invited to read as simultaneously otherworldly and familiar. Permeating the description of the ghost's decomposing body with naturalistic (if also symbolically significant) details and metaphors, the poem's details transform Guinevere's mother into an anthropomorphized embodiment of the tarn itself. Bizarrely, the tarn becomes a sort of mother figure, giving birth to a daughter that

¹⁰ One of the most enduring legends regarding the tarn is that of ringing church bells sounding from a town sunk beneath its surface. On this story, see Cox (1974). Hanna (1970: 180–3) also posits the association of the tarn with spectral apparitions in Middle English romances, and is cited by Roscoe (2014: 54), who notes the unnamed river briefly mentioned in line 55 of the *Awntyrs* as perhaps evoking a sense of encounters with ghosts (although notably that line is omitted in the Douce MS of the poem; see Hahn, note to line 55 [1996: 204]). For more on the medieval and especially post-medieval history of the tarn and Inglewood Forest (up to the disappearance of the tarn as a body of water), see especially Kelly (2016).

¹¹ Haught (2010: 10–1) raises this point in her explanation of how the mentions of Lucifer suggest (but not conclusively) that the apparition may already be damned and thus sent to Hell, breaking with the models provided in the *Trental of Saint Gregory* tradition.

retrospectively serves as the mother to the human queen she encounters. This figure, then, is at once a liminal, boundary-citizen of Arthurian, human society,¹² and an extension of the text's presentation of the local biome of the tarn. The fact that she recalls her own royalty in turn reminds audiences of how even the mighty cannot escape death while also calling explicit attention, as I shall show, to the limitations of the boundaries and meanings human beings seek to impose on their surrounding environments. I linger on this environmental embodiment, then, to examine what she reveals regarding late medieval understandings of the 'lively thinginess' of the tarn (Kelly, 2016: 243).¹³ Here, the landscape (or waterscape) presents both the past and future as present,¹⁴ and layers the immediacy of experience atop a timeless

¹² Jost (2002) reads Guinevere's mother as an 'outsider' judging Arthur's court; see n. 9, above. Any such reading of this figure ultimately builds upon the remarks of Fradenburg, who links the liminality of Guinevere's mother in *Awntyrs* and figures of 'wild women' in other stories to the outsider status of queens in late medieval literature and society. As she avers, 'being liminal figures—such as the wild people also were—queens could be identified with "land", "people", "nation", their liminality serving the very principle of identity, of the invulnerability rather than the vulnerability of the body of the realm' (Fradenburg, 1991: 252). For an investigation of how the ghost's gender makes the court's dismissal of its uniquely synchronic perspective on history 'that much easier to accomplish', see Haught (2010: 17, and throughout).

¹³ Kelly's study considers the geographic and cultural space of the tarn from the medieval period to the modern moment, where it exists as 'a dry cultivated field, rich in organic material precisely because it was once swampy' (2016: 260), with focused considerations of how some passages from the poem fit into the broader narrative of loss associated with the tarn over time (especially considering it is now physically gone). As she puts it, '[i]n this essay, I turned an ecological eye on a story that is not about the natural world at all but is instead an invented tale about King Arthur in which the natural world is simply named and never described' (2016: 261). My reading, then, seeks to expand upon this approach by considering further how the poem may encode medieval ways of thinking about, and living in, the natural world.

¹⁴ Identifying a similar effect in the poem, Phillips instead ascribes it to the baptismal, liturgical and theological focus of the poem, positing that '[s]eparate events and separate times seem telescoped together, the same forces at work in each. This corresponds to the ways in which in its non-theological areas the poem conflates and collapses our sense of past, present and future: the encounter of mother and daughter presents a mirror of both Guinevere's future and the ghost's past; the ghost's fall from former glory foreshadows Arthur's and Gawain's future falls ... These forays backwards and forwards in history, together with the eschatological and liturgical motifs, make the whole narrative ... into a *multum in parvo*: the short tale contains within it the great dramas of its characters' fates, in this world and the next' (1989: 56). Hanna (1970: 289–90) reads the stanza form as informing the audience of the poem's march towards the future while simultaneously evoking how Guinevere is trapped in its present. I add to this discussion by examining how an ability to reach outside of time could be

stability. Speaking of *Lazamon's Brut*, Christopher Cannon has argued 'that the land's stability through time comes to be its most important characteristic, as if its principal use and interest to people was to remain unchanged through continuous waves of human happening' (2007: 53). In *Awntyrs*, the prophetic figure of Guinevere's mother demonstrates a conception of landscape that combines this timelessness, which associates the tarn with the spiritual realm(s), with human divisions of God's creation into legally definable segments of ownable or exchangeable property. The natural land and water emerge as composite identities that encompass and exceed the human attempts to categorize and possess them—a point that may be further highlighted by the anger, fear, and violent acts that arise in the second half of the poem's arguments over the possession of landed properties. Thus, in addition to the implicit criticisms of imperialist colonization analysed at length by other scholars, the tarn-figure of the poem's initial movement suggests that the land (and its bodies of water) in fact point back to the unity of creation. This theme of union is ignored only at one's peril—a lesson that, famously, the Arthurian court is fated to learn through experience.

Emerging from, and in a sense incorporating this water-based biome, is the figure of the mother-as-corpse. 'There come a lowe one the loughe ... / [i]n the lyknes of Lucyfere, laythesete in Helle,/[a]nd glides to Sir Gawayn the gates to gayne,/[Y]auland and yomerand, with many loude yelle' (Anon., 1995: 180 [ll. 83–7]).¹⁵ Both naturalistic (in terms of marsh gas) and symbolic (with the mention of Hell), this description provides for the modern reader a chance echo of *Beowulf's* mere—'fire on the water' (Anon., 2000: 95 [l. 1366])—that emphasizes the otherworldliness of the apparition—its inhumanness. Yet its cries immediately morph into language, as it laments its own creation—much akin to the late-medieval figure of the fallen man,

attributed to real-world waterscapes themselves, and the implications of such an understanding of the natural world.

¹⁵ Interestingly, Hahn, in his note to line 85 (1995: 205) and Gates, in his list of variations on line 85, (1969: 98) both note that all other manuscripts here say that the fire/figure floats to Guinevere, not Gawain. If the figure does address Guinevere, then the birth/womb imagery would be even further emphasized, with the queen forced to encounter the specter of her own dead mother.

bereft of faith by wanhope: 'I ban the body me bare!/Alas! Now kindeles my care; /I gloppen and I grete!' (Anon., 1995: 180 [ll. 89–91]).¹⁶ The immediately following line—'Then gloppenet and grete Gaynour the gay' (Anon., 1995: 181 [l. 92])—through its repetition of the same terms attributed to the (living) queen, establishes the foundation for the mirror relationship between Guinevere and her mother that the text will later make explicit.¹⁷

However, right after Gawain and Guinevere converse, deciding to send the knight to approach the figure, the text switches back to a description of Guinevere's mother. While, Robson (2000: 227) proposes, parts of this description make the figure reminiscent of a rotting corpse,¹⁸ its details also call to mind a more concrete connection to the 'body' of the tarn:

¹⁶ This curse of the mother—'the body me bare'—encodes a simultaneous curse of one's own body, the vessel that 'bears' the soul. This particular comment shares close affinities with a formulaic commonplace ('bannen' + one's own birth) in 14th- and 15th-century religious and *memento mori* literature, often attributed to a character that surrenders itself to wanhope (and thereby damnation). See for instance the citations under the *Middle English Dictionary* (McSparran, 2001; hereafter *MED*) entry for 'bannen (v.)', meaning 2a. Haught (2010: 20–1, n. 17) raises some similar points, investigating the line as a pun that could curse either the apparition's own body or the body she bore while alive (Guinevere), laying the focus of the text thereby on Guinevere's problematic status as a mother. She also argues that 'this cursing of the body she bore while alive suggests the importance of an awareness of time and experience that extends beyond the present' (Haught, 2010: 9), a reading that correlates with the significance I think this scene attaches to the role of the tarn itself both within and beyond history.

¹⁷ Klausner (1972: 318) also notes the parallel descriptions of sounds between Guinevere and her mother here, although he suggests a light, perhaps comic tone for this part of the scene that I do not see. Nearly every modern reader has noted some aspect of connection between mother and daughter, usually on the basis of the mother's suffering for adultery, and the parallel role of Guinevere as Lancelot's lover (although the romance is carefully silent regarding this latter part of the Arthurian myth). See for instance Robson, who posits that 'the two female characters are, to many intents and purposes, identical' (2000: 231). In this view, she expands upon Spearing (1981: 193). Jost also mentions an empathetic link between the two figures, noting that 'by the token of her admission [of a broken vow], and the sights, sounds, and smells of this place, can she [Guinevere] know her mother, so transformed from her earthly state' (2012: 597), although Jost does not explicate how the 'sights, sounds, and smells' help Guinevere to identify her mother.

¹⁸ Twu (2003: 119) reads a handful of details from this description as linking the mother to the *memento mori* tradition. Jost similarly interprets the description of this figure as 'an inhuman reflection of a menacing ghost', an 'unnatural monstrosity' that demonstrates the 'the climate of unreality, the unearthly feeling of an unnatural place', that Jost sees as defining the tarn in this text (2012: 594). Conversely, while the walking corpse is definitely a fantastical figure, I follow Robson (2000) in reading

Bare was the body and blak to the bone,
 Al biclagged in clay uncomly cladde.
 Hit waried, hit wayment as a woman,
 But on hide ne on huwe no heling hit hadde.
 Hit stemed, hit stonayde, hit stode as a stone,
 Hit marred, hit memered, hit mused for madde.
 Agayn the grisly goost Sir Gawayn is gone;
 He rayked oute at a res, for he was never drad.
 Drad was he never, ho so right redes.
 On the chef of the cholle,
 A pade pikes on the polle,
 With eighen holked ful holle
 That gloed as the gledes.

Al glowed as a glede the goste there ho glides,
 Umbeclipped in a cloude of clethyng unclere,
 Serkeled with serpentis all aboute the sides —
 To tell the todes theron my tonge wer full tere. (Anon., 1995: 181 [ll. 105–121])

This description presents a natural, corpse-like counterpoint to the opening description of Guinevere (Anon., 1995: 178 [ll. 14–26]) in that the text emphasizes how the apparition is ‘uncomly cladde’: that is, covered in clay, toads, and serpents,¹⁹ and, ‘bare’ of skin, left ‘blak to the bone’. While definitely reminiscent, as Robson argues, of a decaying human body, the apparition simultaneously embodies a hybrid character composed of both human and environmental elements. In effect, the

a reflection of much more naturalistic understandings of human conceptions of, and relationships to, the tarn as a real-world, experienced place.

¹⁹ Reading the toads symbolically, Phillips notes that ‘[t]he toads and serpents in the *Awntyrs* thus have complex ancestry: they belong to the *memento mori* tradition, demonstrating dissolution of the corpse; they may also reflect tales and exempla of “Adulterous Mother” type, where toads and serpents symbolize illicit kisses and illegitimate children; but they also clearly represent the fiends of Hell who, held at bay by baptism, have reclaimed the sinner’ (1989: 51). This passage is also cited by Robson (2000: 227). For more on the associations of serpents (often to past lovers) and toads (often to illegitimate children) in the ‘Adulterous Mother’ tradition, see also Klausner (1972: 311–4).

apparition here becomes a 'tarn-woman': literally, she is composed of the physical and aesthetic components of the tarn—clay, serpents, toads, 'black' rot and shadows—layered atop, and woven throughout, a human skeleton. To an audience familiar with the environment of a tarn, the association is clear. These physical characteristics, of course, also carry connotations of spiritual significance evoking sins and the denizens of Hell. The figure of death, then, becomes a vehicle for contemplating the human relationship with the local landscape and the spiritual realms beneath it; and the space of the tarn provides the perfect environment for all of these elements to be made readily 'visible' to the human viewer, as a medium both semi-transparent (unlike the hard earth) and simultaneously alien (as a liquid, constantly in motion). Even the sounds that the figure emits echo those of the tarn's own water, particularly in the context of a vicious hailstorm: 'Hit stemered, hit stonayde, hit stode as a stone,/ [h]it marred, hit memered, hit mused for madde' (Anon., 1995: 181 [ll. 109–10]). Yet the figure also 'stode as a stone' and 'stonayde', details that call to mind (either by simile or homophony) the still stones glimpsed within and through the water of the tarn. In her appearance, sounds, and movements, then, the apparition anthropomorphically embodies the human experience of the tarn come alive.

An extension of the body of water, an anthropomorphized symbol of a specific space that is simultaneously 'naturally' and 'culturally' defined, this figure of the 'tarn-woman' exemplifies the tension inherent in human conceptions of the physical world. Overflowing the shore of the tarn, the ghost haunts not only the tarn itself, but the surrounding woodlands as well: 'I mot walke on my wey thorgh this wilde wode/ [i]n my wonyngstid in wo for to welle' (Anon., 1995: 187 [ll. 315–6]). Her presence thus extends our attention to the surrounding woodlands detailed in the poem's opening hunt, while also evoking the sense of a tarn's surrounding environment, where the substance (and often the smell) of the water might seep into the surrounding forest. The shores of smaller bodies of water often change in such ways, leaving boggy or swampy ground around them.²⁰

²⁰ As Kelly (2016: 251–2) notes, later landowners of the Tarn Wathelene itself had trouble draining it due to its tendency to seep in just this way, rendering the surrounding area marshy. Indeed, Gawain

The tarn-mother's blurring of such boundaries—water and land, natural and supernatural, the realms of God and Lucifer²¹—also casts a critical eye on the permanence (and perhaps legitimacy) of the concept of land as property. Indeed, the tarn-woman points to such issues of interpreting landscape when she seeks to describe her own past wealth, and through it, her conception of what human 'wealth' means:

Quene was I somwile, brighter of browes
 Then Berell or Brangwayn, thes burdes so bolde;
 Of al gamen or gle that on grounde growes
 Gretter then Dame Gaynour, of garson and golde,
 Of palaies, of parkes, of pondes, of plowes,
 Of townes, of toures, of tresour untolde,
 Of castelles, of contreyes, of craggis, of clowes.
 Now am I caught oute of kide to cares so colde;
 Into care am I caught and couched in clay. (Anon., 1995: 182 [ll. 144–152])

Clearly, landscape and landholdings are primary constituent elements, in the tarn-woman's 'eyes', of human wealth and cultural prestige.²² As Kelly (2016: 246) posits,

himself in the poem calls out the apparition's role in muddying such boundaries; when he first addresses the ghost, he charges her, in the name of Christ, to 'sei me the sothe whether thou shalle, / [a]nd whi thou walkest thes wayes the wodes within' (Anon., 1995: 182 [ll. 135–6]). His words draw attention to the importance of the tarn-figure's breaching of the distinctions between spiritual and worldly realms, along with her passage from the water onto the land, especially as he asks her, in effect, 'where are you going?'

²¹ As Lowe notes, 'the ghost is a representative of both the hellish and heavenly forces, and her function is complemented by the material world', since she 'acts as the symbol of the reality that underlies worldly vanity; her history serves as a negative guideline to proper behavior, made explicit in her instructive speech' (1980: 214, 218). I argue that the tarn itself, through its association with the ghost, comes to perform some similar roles, and casts real-life waterscapes as direct connections to such supernatural realms and levels of signification.

²² In her reading of this passage as a pairing of 'representations of land with remorseful female lust and with losses to sovereign power', Ingham avers that '[t]his catalogue of things Guinevere's mother held as queen foregrounds the spaces of her sovereignty', and thus '[l]and signifies both the glorious wealth of aristocratic privilege and the unbelievable breadth of a realm', with 'the loss of these glories link[ing] the apparently sinful and disfigured female body with sovereign loss' (2001: 180–1). Ingham

the apparition here prioritizes the understanding of landscape through labels, and thereby sees nature as a collection of possessions that she, as a melancholic, mourns the loss of but cannot regain.²³ In addition to participating in this way of evaluating the natural world, however, I aver that the ghost's description of her own body within this catalogue of property categories complicates the poem's presentation of land as possession. By presenting her corpse as 'caught' by the material of the earth, the tarn-mother reverses the usual romance placement of inheritance and property in human hands. Instead, the earth inherits her, and makes her its own possession. In the process, *Awntyrs* reveals not only the loss of the apparition's cultural prestige by way of landholdings, but more significantly the absorption of her corporeal identity by the tarn itself. It is the focus on waterscapes in particular here that upsets such a possessive characterization of human relationships with their natural environment. Notably, the apparition includes 'pondes' in her list as human-shaped waterscapes, alongside examples of human-crafted landscape features ('parkes' and 'plowes').

then goes on to connect such associations between female bodies and sovereign loss to the loathly lady tradition, as exemplified by John Gower's *Tale of Florent* (2001: 181–3), arguing that, 'like the apparently wild "lady of the land", the space of wilderness can be similarly transformed into a well-ruled sovereign realm' (2001: 183). Ultimately, she sees Guinevere's mother's prophetic warnings as explicating the link of Arthur's 'ambitions for land to sovereign failure' (2001: 184), a lens through which she reads the poem's tournament episode (2001: 185–91). While Ingham provides an insightful interpretation of the tarn-figure, she focuses solely on the human, sexual, and political significance of her named possessions. I thus expand upon these observations through an examination of how the tarn setting amplifies our understanding of Guinevere's mother's status as a speaker for the natural world.

²³ Speaking of this passage, Kelly (2016: 246) avers that the apparition speaks 'not only of *castelles* and *parkes*, but of natural geographic features, *cragges* and *clowes*', revealing that '[h]er sovereignty reaches even into "waste places"'. In turn, '[i]f such places can be owned, they can be gifted, inherited, sold—or, as here, "lost"—and Guinevere's mother 'grieves her losses even after death' (Kelly, 2016: 246). She later adds that Guinevere's mother, her remains blackened, is an image of the melancholic, 'practicing a kind of mimesis through her recitation of places and pleasures no longer hers', recitations that 'are not cathartic enough, it seems, to move her out of melancholy' (2016: 262). While this reading insightfully reveals a sense of emotional attachment to land, particularly through the idea that here 'natural places are experienced—that is, made intelligible—as *possessions*' or 'commodities' (2016: 246, emphasis in the original), I posit that the poem also continues to consider the tarn-space, and the figure of Guinevere's mother as a result, as an emissary from the divine realms of prophecy beneath the natural world. The poem thus highlights the limitations to thinking of the natural world as a collection of 'possessions' or properties.

Even elements of 'wilder' topography are combined through alliteration with explicitly or implicitly political designations of human power over landscape and space, as 'cragges' and 'clowes' gain mention only alongside 'castelles' and 'contreyes'. This last, indeed, is particularly interesting in terms of its ambiguity, referring as it could to 'lands' in general, to political organizations of territory like kingdoms or duchies, or to the inhabitants of the land.²⁴ Using such a term, the apparition seems to group political designations of space along with her other divisions of land into material wealth, thereby calling both the wealth itself and the systems that evaluate landscape in such a manner into question. Yet the 'wilder' waterscapes of tarns, lakes, rivers, and streams are omitted from her catalogue of landholding labels. As such, the tarn-woman's list at once emphasizes her (and the poem's own) conception of wealth as an issue of one's relationship with the land and its features, and casts the tarn as space uniquely situated on the boundary of 'possessed' (as with the pond) and 'wild' topography. Indeed, these labels and divisions of the natural world, so common to the property-obsessed genre of romance, are snatched away from her as she is 'caught oute of kide' (Anon., 1995: 182 [l. 151]) and thus out of the cycle of inheritance;²⁵ her body becomes instead the property of the landscape itself, 'couched in clay' (Anon., 1995: 182 [l. 152]). Even as she rises to address her audience, the clay remains—clinging to, and in a sense composing, her corpse.²⁶ The

²⁴ See *MED*, *contre(e)* (n.), all meanings.

²⁵ On the ghost being cast outside of the normal community of kinship and thus the traditional passage of time, emphasizing thereby her liminality, see further Radulescu (2016: 33) and Haught (2010). See also Kelly (2016: 263), who argues that the ghost provides an example of how '[m]elancholy, it might be said, stops time, while mourning keeps us moving through time ... as we continually renegotiate our relation to the past and to the natural world of the past'.

²⁶ See again her description as '[a] biclagged in clay uncomly cladde' (Anon., 1995: 181 [l. 106]), discussed above. Intriguingly, the apparition also foretells such a fate for Gawain himself, telling him that '[i]n a slake thou shal be slayne' (Anon., 1995: 187 [l. 298]), while prophesying that Arthur himself will also be wounded and his Round Table destroyed '[u]ppon Cornewayle coast' (Anon., 1995: 187 [l. 301]). Additionally, she observes earlier that, on account of the fact that Arthur 'is to covetous, .../[h]e shal light ful lowe on the sesondes' (Anon., 1995: 186 [ll. 265, 268]). Pointing to the former instance, Lowe notes that the 'slake' in which Gawain is destined to die refers to 'a hollow in a mudbank' (1980: 216), while the *MED* suggests the possible meaning of 'a shoal, mud flat' based on its use in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*; see *MED*, *slak* (n.[2]). Death (particularly for Arthur's court), then, is tied to watersides by the apparition herself, causing the audience to reflect further on the tarn's

background storm also helps to emphasize the liminality of the tarn-space relative to human control, causing Arthur, Guinevere, Gawain, and the rest of the hunting party to scatter before its onslaught, as '[t]hay ranne faste to the roches, for reddoure of the raynne/[f]or the sneterand snawe snartly hem snelles' (Anon., 1995: 180 [ll. 81–2]). Such a moment is precisely when the human characters are forced to admit the limits of their own control, and face the multifaceted tensions that compose their concept of the tarn-space.

On the one hand, then, this tarn exists alongside the romance itself as an experienced space that determines a culturally-fixed range of associations evoked by its name. In addition to its noted association with Arthurian adventures, this lake was, for instance, known both in medieval times and 'as late as the 18th-century for the value of its carp' (Allen, 2004: 192).²⁷ Indeed, registers of the late 13th-century record innumerable legal battles over the rights to its rich fish resources (Cox, 1974: 130).²⁸ The tarn thus carries a layer of economic significance; its value in terms of producing fish for both consumption and exchange. It also invites human visitors to think of acts associated with this register of interpretation for the tarn, for example fishing or, as in the *Awntyrs*, hunting. Moreover, the tarn provided a common resting point for travelers heading to and from Scotland bearing trade goods (Allen, 2004: 192). As such, the tarn-space serves as a microcosm of the entire March region's liminal status, caught between the burgeoning imperialism (or proto-nationalism) of the Scottish and English crowns. Yet, out in the middle of Inglewood Forest—one of,

own status as a watery portal to death and the realms beyond. This association between Arthur and watersides is, of course, not unique to *Awntyrs*. Indeed, Hahn (1995: 212–3) suggests that *Awntyrs* expects its audience to be familiar with the seaside death of Gawain in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, an association driven home by *Awntyrs*' use of the word 'slake'. For an insightful discussion of the political significance of seashores to the definition of Englishness in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, see Lavezzo (2011). In particular, she examines how that poem also emphasizes the mudflats as a significant element of Arthur's final return to England, slowing both his and Gawain's approach to solid land to fight Mordred while allowing the poem to linger on disturbing the political boundary of the British seashore (Lavezzo, 2011: 130–2).

²⁷ Allen (2004: 192, n. 31) notes this fact, drawn from Hutchinson (1794: 491).

²⁸ Cox explains further that 'not only was Inglewood renowned for its game in the Middle Ages but also for the excellent fishing resources of the tarn, a fact conspicuous from the numerous litigations over fishing rights' (1974: 130). He specifically points to a case record from the 13th year of the reign of Edward I (c. 1285).

if not the, largest forest(s) in England at the time—the tarn also serves as a reminder of the immediate presence of the natural world, pointing to the human-managed²⁹ yet not human-made environments that underpin economic endeavor, and thus to human reliance on that supra-human world.

Moving in this direction leads us to yet another layer of signification embodied by the tarn: the perceived ‘timelessness’ of the natural world, evoked especially by the tarn-woman’s prophetic warnings. Constant human traffic—fishermen, hunters, drovers, and brigands—points to the (again, perceived) unchanging permanence of the tarn-space itself. Human beings, caught in the ‘narrative’ of historical time, come and go; but the tarn remains. Water and land endure, beyond the constraints that human squabbles over property ownership attempt to (re)inscribe in the poem’s second half. In this way, the tarn embodies the omnipresent of the divine represented in the physical world—a world that, of course, will itself ultimately be stripped away at Judgment Day. This last point, then, links up again with the *Awntyrs*’ echo of the apocalypse in the scene of ‘darkness at noon’ that precipitates the tarn-woman’s rise.³⁰ Yet the tarn, thick with clay and mud, represents the basic matter from which, in the Christian account of the world’s creation, humanity itself was crafted.³¹ It also, of course, presents a possible physical link to the negative consequences of life misspent in the physical world, carrying as it does in the text’s

²⁹ For an argument that examines the poem’s language to argue that the *Awntyrs* describes Inglewood Forest as a managed woodland-pasture, see Howes (2013). Her conclusion that *Awntyrs*’ forest demonstrates that, in this romance, ‘imagined and magical events animate the everyday landscape of medieval Britain’ (2013: 189), accords with my own reading of Guinevere’s mother as tarn-figure.

³⁰ For more on the apocalyptic elements of the *Awntyrs*’ scene at the tarn, see further Robson (2000: 228–31).

³¹ In the *Avowing of Arthur*—another (if more explicitly humorous) romance that contains a narrative episode with Gawain facing an adversary at the Tarn Walthelene—the text begins with an explanation of the origins of humankind in the matter of the earth itself:

He that made us on the mulde,
 And fair fourmet the folde,
 Atte His will, as He wold,
 The see and the sande,
 Giffe hom joy that will here
 Of dughti men and of dere,
 Of haldurs that before us were,
 That lifd in this londe. (ll. 1–8 from the version presented in Hahn [1995: 119])

account so many associations with the materials and sufferings of the tortured in Hell. Considering these sedimentary layers of meaning, then, it makes sense that the tarn would become embodied as an undead woman, for the tarn itself is both within and without human, historical time, a physical reality separate from human bodies that is nevertheless experienced through the multiple lenses of economic, cultural, and lived significance. Simultaneously known and unknowable, the tarn-woman becomes a microcosm of nature itself, and yet one that remains specific in space and place, in concordance with the text's decidedly regional, political perspective.

The extended focus of *Awntyrs* on such an inland waterscape is fairly unique for a Middle English romance in that it raises a variety of different associations and levels of significance for the space that play off real-world associations with a particular tarn (even if those associations may have been less immediately familiar to later audiences in other parts of Britain). The alliterative style, too, allows the poem room to elaborate upon its descriptions of space and environment. Metrical romances, on the other hand, often present much more concise snapshots of waterscapes. Yet, despite their brevity, such scenes provide significant insight into contemporary understandings of water as both a literary symbol and a potent force of nature.

A prime example of this approach can be found in the popular 14th-century romance of *Sir Isumbras*. Here, bodies of water play a different, more adversarial or supplementary role—depending upon the perspective derived from one's point in the narrative—than the tarn of *Awntyrs*.³² In broad strokes, this romance adaptation of the Saint Eustace and 'Man Tried by Fate' narratives deals with a hero whose pride earns him an ultimatum from God: he must face suffering in youth or age.³³ Choosing

³² Hudson observes that '*Sir Isumbras* is one of the most popular Middle English romances, surviving in more manuscripts and prints (nine and five, respectively) than any other romance' (2006: 5). As Radulescu (2013: 35) notes before providing an overview of *Isumbras*' manuscript contexts, the poem survives 'in many more manuscript and printed copies together (14) than any other Middle English romance'. Only the *Tale of Gamelyn* survives in more manuscripts, and that because of its integration with the *Canterbury Tales*.

³³ On the much-noted association between the plot of the *South English Legendary* tale of Saint Eustace and *Sir Isumbras*, see for example Thompson (1993), Braswell (1965), and Mehl (1968: 128–35). Hopkins (1990: 120–1) discusses the connections of *Isumbras* to both the Saint Eustace stories and what she labels a 'group of romances known as the "Eustace-Constance-Florence-Griselda" legends,

youth, he loses first all of his possessions and then his family, having his children stolen by animals, and his wife abducted by Saracens. Destitute and alone, Isumbras joins a community of smiths, works his way up the social hierarchy, fights in a Christian army, does penance in the holy land as a pilgrim, and is ultimately reunited with his family, conquering the Saracen lands and ending the story wealthy once more. Modern scholars have read this story, and the details associated with it, in the context of an exemplary penitential (Hopkins, 1990: 119–43) or Crusading narrative (Manion, 2010). Elizabeth Fowler suggests that the romance functions as a thought experiment to test the ‘political, sexual, and religious bounds of lordship’ in a ‘stark landscape of suppose’ (2000: 99, 118),³⁴ while Samara Landers (2009) argues that the poem’s unique concentration on Isumbras as a figure who fails to remain in any particular group for the duration of the poem focuses the text on the development of knightly identity. Raluca L. Radulescu, meanwhile, presents an insightful reading of the romance as it would have been received by the readers of its 15th-century manuscript contexts, exploring its ‘everyman’ appeal in the service of explaining the political ramifications of male governance and female authority during the Wars of the Roses (2013: 66–86).³⁵

As a corollary to these central concerns, however, the romance presents a relationship between narrative progression and conceptions of water. Appearing in the forms of a river, the ‘Grykkysse see’ (Anon., 2006: 15 [l. 194]),³⁶ and ‘a welle-strem’ (Anon., 2006: 23 [l. 512]), water in this text serves to separate the core family

in which the main story motif is that of “The Man Tried by Fate”, which try the sufferer’s faith in a manner akin to Job’. On the topoi of being cast adrift at sea and the roles of seashores in such narratives, see the discussion in n. 42, below.

³⁴ The second quote is cited by Manion (2010: 73) as well.

³⁵ Radulescu’s mapping of this romance’s variants onto 15th-century political contexts builds from the basis that ‘the topic of a landowner or temporal ruler suffering for various sins, including that of pride, was one likely to find an audience eager to discuss abuses in local and central government and rulers’ lack of interest in the welfare of their subjects or retainers’ (2013: 69). Of course, Radulescu charts *Isumbras*’ plot as a lesson in righting such sins through lessons in good governance, a reading with which my own analysis of Isumbras’ developing understanding of landscape value and development certainly concurs.

³⁶ Citations are taken from *Sir Isumbras* in Hudson (2006). Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are from the version surviving in the early 15th-century Cambridge, Gonville and Caius College MS 175.

and cause suffering, as well as provide recognition of, and reward for, that suffering and loneliness. Extensions of the divine mandate with which the text begins, these bodies of water betray a sincere medieval anxiety about the status of rivers and seas as spaces that isolate the suffering individual. Ever-rushing and powerful, the strength of this water will inevitably overwhelm any human hero who relies primarily upon his corporeal strength. Once Isumbras has learned to seek his strength beyond the realms of this life, however, water ceases to obstruct him, becoming powerless before the advance of the enlightened individual. Indeed, the last significant body of water in the romance, a well, provides the space alongside which Isumbras is finally forgiven his arrogant trespass by a merciful angel, and where he is recognized as a reformed, appropriately pious hero. Water, then, becomes inextricably associated with divine will: an obstacle or threat at first, but, when acknowledged and submitted to, a source of comfort and spiritual refreshment. A baptismal metaphor, though latent in this text, is clearly implicated.

Yet, beyond reinforcing a traditional reading of *Isumbras* as a redemption narrative, the bodies of water demonstrate some uniquely intriguing elements. First, the initial two bodies of water, as mentioned above, deconstruct the human family unit. Spiritual purification, they emphasize, is an experience that fundamentally separates the penitent from other humans.³⁷ For instance, fleeing their destroyed home, Isumbras and his family 'kome by a water kene,/[t]her over they wolde fayn have bene./Thenne was her kare the more' (Anon., 2006: 14 [ll. 160–2]). The description of the 'kene' river evokes two things here: one, that its role is to separate one from desire, and two, that it will increase 'kare'. The river accomplishes these two roles by exerting its superior strength over human bodies, forcing Isumbras to carry his family across one by one, and then to watch helplessly as, while he crosses, wild animals steal away each child that he has left on the far bank (Anon., 2006: 15 [ll. 163–80]). In the end, Isumbras is only able to stay connected to his wife and youngest child by, quite

³⁷ This point is in keeping with the teachings of the Gospels. See for instance Matthew 10:37, 'He that loveth father or mother more than me, is not worthy of me; and he that loveth son or daughter more than me, is not worthy of me' (Vulgate). In this way, the bodies of water are presented as even more in line with divine will.

literally, holding on to them: '[h]ys wyff was hym leeff and dere,/ [a]nd ovr the watyr he here bere,/ [h]ys yongeste sone alsoo' (Anon., 2006: 15 [ll. 190–2]). Nevertheless, the rushing waters of the river have already served to introduce waterscapes as physical embodiments of God's (and the poem's) desire to isolate Isumbras in his suffering, presenting a chilling view of water as demonstrating human helplessness that the subsequent seaside scene capitalizes upon.

The sea and its beach, however, carry the additional significance of serving as a site of cultural and religious conflict, pitting the shore-bound Christian Isumbras against the seafaring, presumably Muslim Saracens, an opposition common to many non-Arthurian Middle English romances such as *King Horn* (Sobecki, 2006; 2007: 100–12).³⁸ This space encompasses Isumbras's most completely humbling defeat, a low point that defines the poem's opening half.³⁹ One can sense the dread when Isumbras, his wife, and their remaining child first reach the beach:

Thorwgh forest they wente dayes three
 Tyl they come to Grykkyssche see,
 They grette and wer full woo.
 As they stood upon the lande
 They sawe faste come saylande
 Three hundryd schyppys and moo. (Anon., 2006: 15 [ll. 193–8])

³⁸ Sobecki identifies the beach as the scene of a cultural, religious conflict between (land-bound) Christians and (seafaring) Saracens in the early Middle English romance *King Horn*. I argue that similar issues are at play in the seashore scene from *Sir Isumbras*. Moreover, while my focus is not on understanding literary shores and seas in terms of burgeoning national and political identities of 'Englishness' and 'Britishness', such work provides valuable insights into alternate ways of understanding Britain's archipelagic mindset in the Middle Ages and after. For an insightful overview of such work, focusing primarily on pre-conquest literature, but including discussions of a post conquest romance—the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*—and other late medieval and even 19th-century texts, see Sobecki (2011).

³⁹ That this moment represents the depths of Isumbras's despair is a characterization shared by many readers; see for instance Hopkins (1990: 129). My reading, however, adds a focus on the context of the seashore to understanding this scene.

The appearance of these unknown ships once again casts the sea as a space full of unpredictable dangers. As with the earlier river, so too does the sea only increase their 'kare'. But, while Isumbras was able to overcome the river at least partially by brute strength, the sea, we shall soon see, utterly defeats him. Another conception of personal identity must be sought before Isumbras can properly meet the sea's challenge.

Stumbling onto the beach, Isumbras and what remains of his family encounter the Saracen armada, an encounter which, as other scholars have noted, builds upon the conception of the 'Greek Sea' as the border between Christian Europe and the Muslim Middle East (Fowler, 2000: 107, 116; Sikorska, 2014: 50).⁴⁰ Refusing to enter into the sailors' service, Isumbras begs for food from the Saracen Sultan, who, struck by the beauty of Isumbras' wife, demands that the protagonist sell her. Having refused to relinquish his wife to the Sultan:

The gold upon hys mantal they told
 And to himselff they gan it folde
 And took hys wyff hym froo.
 And sithen on the land they hym casten
 And beten hym tyl hys sydys brasten
 And maden hys flesch al bloo. (Anon., 2006: 17–18 [ll. 286–291])⁴¹

⁴⁰ See especially Fowler, who notes in passing the importance of the sea as a political and religious boundary (2000: 107, 116), but provides insightful analyses of the poem's presentation of the wife's *raptus* as it reflects on Isumbras' wedding vows (2000: 107–10), and of the stakes at play in the conversation between Isumbras and the Sultan in this scene (2000: 116–8). Sikorska also notes the Greek Sea as a cultural and climactic border in her examination of the presentation of fear and the Saracen 'other' in this text (2014: 50).

⁴¹ Hudson, in her note to line 291 (2006: 34), observes that many later manuscripts follow this moment with an even more horrible stanza that further emphasizes the pathos of the scene, and the severing of family bonds that occurs on the shore. For instance, Lincoln Cathedral MS 91 here reads:

The littill childe one lande was sett
 And sawe how mene his fadir bett,
 He wepid and was full waa.
 The lady grete and gafe hir ill,
 Unnethes thay myght halde hir still

These lines encode a variety of conceptions regarding the human experience of the shore and the sea it borders. First, the Mediterranean's association with mercantile endeavor—an association of water and trade that surely resonated with English readers at all familiar with the trade of wool and cloth with the Low Countries across the English Channel (Kruger, 2007)—is emphasized in the money that the sailors insultingly leave behind with Isumbras. Refusing to honor the bonds of the noble family, they see gold as a way to satisfy any desire, and, as the Sultan and his men 'sende here over the see' (Anon., 2006: 18 [l. 294]), the sea provides a means by which they can make good on and protect their gains. Additionally, this scene reveals the violence that saturates the seashore, and inevitably accompanies the separation of the family. This element could reflect a contemporary audience's conception of the sea as a space that necessitated physical endurance and corporeal suffering to traverse successfully, and, whether successfully accomplished or no, the attempt to cross the sea would necessitate the sailor leaving behind his wife and children. Here, of course, the wife is the one taken, emphasizing the dangers—to familial bonds especially—inherent in the arrival of any human beings from across the sea.

Yet alongside this seashore lie the hills wherein Isumbras, through becoming a miner, blacksmith, and then a self-made knight, works his way back up the social hierarchy, an ascent culminating in his traversal of the Greek Sea itself, in order to reclaim his wife and reassemble the family (and future) of his reclaimed aristocratic power. Similar to the self-surrender of the patient sufferer adrift, a character so common to related romances (such as tales of Constance), Isumbras will relinquish his identity and fortune to the whims of the sea (and, thereby, of God).⁴² First,

That ne scho hirselve walde slaa.
 Hir armes scho sprede and lowde gane crye
 And ofte scho cryed one oure lady,
 'Sall we departe in two?
 Allas, for sall I never blythe be,
 My weddede lorde sall I never see.
 Now wakyns 'all my woo'.

⁴² This distinction, of course, plays into gender as well, as many Middle English romances (such as *Emare*) dealing with the protagonist adrift center on women or other marginalized figures, as Cooper (2010: 106–36) argues. On how such romances adopt these topoi in ways that reflect contemporary

though, he must suffer on land, laboring for seven years to begin to redeem (and remake) himself. This trial complete, Isumbras helps to defeat the Saracen army, and personally slays the Sultan (Anon., 2006: 20–21 [ll. 400–47]). He is then taken, wounded, to a nunnery, where his injuries are healed (Anon., 2006: 22 [ll. 469–83]). It is thence he departs, not as a proud knight of this world, but a humble servant of the next: for '[h]e purveyyd hym bothe scryp and pyke/[a]nd made hym a palmer lyke/[r]edy for to wende' (Anon., 2006: 22 [ll. 487–9]). Dressed in his palmer's gear, refusing to acknowledge his name, Isumbras has appropriately placed himself entirely into God's hands. As such, Isumbras becomes a pure instrument, a willing possession, of divine will—the trait that reveals itself to be the necessary component in properly dealing with bodies of water:

The ryghte wey thenne took he
 Tyl he come to the Grykkyssche see
 As God Hymself hym sente.
 A schyp fond he redy thare
 On to Acres for to fare,
 And thedyr faste he wente. (Anon., 2006: 22 [ll. 490–5])

There is no dread, no struggle this time. The 'ryghte wey' leads over all obstacles of this world, transforming them instead into modes of conveyance or necessary experiences. The sea, in effect, serves primarily to emphasize the English sense of the otherworld or spiritual realm as existing 'over there', beyond the ocean. Notably, this sea-crossing moves the text away from an English presentation of borderland topography along the seashore to the idealized, stock landscape of the Holy Land. Appropriately enough, the water that Isumbras encounters here is 'a welle-strem'—a well, spring, or stream used for drinking water⁴³—beside which '[h]e sette hym ... / [s]ore wepande for hys synne' (Anon., 2006: 23 [ll. 512–13]). As soon as the water of his body is shed (as tears) in this sacred space, an angel appears to bring 'hym bred and wyn' (Anon., 2006: 23 [l. 516]), and the message from God that '[f]orgeven is

conceptions of shipwrecks as spaces of potential gain, see also Richmond (2015: 329–31).

⁴³ See *MED* 'wel(le) (n.)', meaning 1c., a) 'welles strem, a bubbling, running stream'.

synne thyn' (Anon., 2006: 23 [l. 519]).⁴⁴ This site is particularly apt for the receipt of comfort, too, since it is the most domesticated water-source to appear in the poem, and thus reminiscent of the divinely-granted rewards for chastened believers that dot the biblical narrative. The process of recomposing his family or reclaiming a noble identity for himself in this life may thus begin, and, notably, this pro-community conclusion leaves out any more mentions of bodies of water. Isumbras has thus learned the appropriately pious way to transform the terrors of water into the boons of divine mercy—a lesson that ultimately leaves behind the practical fears of the poem's opening half for an image of idealized sacred space available to experience in the realms of fiction alone: that place 'across the sea'.

In *Isumbras* and *Awntyrs*, waterscapes emerge as spaces that ask their late medieval audiences to question the malleability of human identity, and to consider humanity's place within God's broader creation as embodied by the natural world. The frequency with which shore scenes begin with or lead to the threat of murder, abduction, separation, or even encounters with messengers from beyond the grave points to concerns with economic and moral consequences that these fantastical narratives cannot seem to escape. Instead of obscuring such anxieties, then, waterside encounters highlight the collection of contradictory meanings that beaches and bodies of water held for the authors and audiences of Middle English romance. Shores, beaches, and banks thus present the clash between human desire—for profit and property—and fear of the alien, uncontrollable fluids of the non-human world.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

⁴⁴ This scene also, as Hopkins (1990: 137–8) explains, reenacts aspects of the ceremony for reconciling a penitent, particularly in terms of the communion imagery.

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