In speaking of the culture of medieval Europe, the term “Dark Ages” is often used to the distress of medieval scholars. It implies a period of ignorance, intolerance, and violence. While certainly a misnomer which would not be readily accepted by the inhabitants of that period, ideas of darkness and isolation were nevertheless very important to the medieval mindset. In a dark world, pockets of civilization were surrounded by a fierce natural world that is difficult to comprehend today. Forests were larger and deeper, and the unknown dwelled within. Protection from the unknown came through the creation of community and social structure. More abstractly, the infinite variety of creation present in nature was overwhelming; through historical study, the medievalist sees individuals that attempted to order this infinite variety for human comprehension. In these attempts, symbolism is of the highest importance in grasping what the world means. Honorius of Autun, a theologian from the first half of the twelfth century remarked, “Every creature is a shadow of truth and life.” The reference to ‘shadows of truth’ is indicative of a long tradition of Christian and Platonic thought which dominated medieval theology for much of the Middle Ages. It deserves mention here so that the general reader will understand the dominant force of this form of Christian thought, which permeated a multitude of sources, both literary and instructional, from the period. In the sources we will examine, nature was a direct manifestation of God’s will. However, this process of ordering did not calm anxieties about the dangers of the natural world. To paraphrase Honorius, nature was a screen through which man can arrive at two ends: although nature could provide insight into the work of God, so too could it lead the searcher astray into worldly preoccupation.

This attempt to know nature properly was by no means limited to theologians. Contemporaneous with this development of spiritual thought, the secular man of means would often turn to humane studies or courtly behaviour. This preoccupation with nature finds itself clearly expressed in the chivalric romances; in these, a searcher quite literally leaves the safety of civilisation and enters into the world of nature. For the more secular literature, nature was a dangerous place wherein adventure and possible gain is found, be it maiden, castle, or, most importantly, glory and honour, an interpretation which seems removed from the theological discussion above. When faced with these two differing readings, it is crucial that the modern reader not see them to be widely divergent. It was not that the secular and the spiritual were seeing two different worlds, but simply that the viewer’s eyes saw from different vantages. From the theological point of view, there are two possibilities when entering the natural world. Some could achieve a higher spirituality, whereas for others the entrance was risky, and one could lose oneself in the natural world. We can, moreover, find the same in chivalric romance, but only by looking deeper, past the battles for honour by one’s peers and into the spiritual quest that also takes place.

Thus, we are to understand that the clergy is able to read nature appropriately. We are also to understand that it is the knighthood that faces the greatest danger in its forays into the forests. Like the clergy, the knighthood can eventually find its way. It is this path, however stumbling, that Gawain walks in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Like Adam, the knighthood could become lost in worldly preoccupation, and remain in danger of destruction. It is this horrific possibility that is reflected in the title character of the bloody Alliterative Morte Arthure. Finally, and most tellingly in a tale by a knight, Sir Thomas Malory, whose Moste Piteous Tale of the Morte Arthur Saunz Guerdon reveals a third possibility to the wandering knighthood—that a knight, in this case Lancelot, who becomes too preoccupied with the world, if he possesses enough prowess, can actually subvert the spiritual rule of the universe and force nature to act in accordance with his chivalry. We will examine each of the possibilities in turn, accompanied by a close reading of each text.
Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, an alliterative Middle English verse romance, tells the tale of a fateful Christmas Feast of Arthur's peers. There is the sudden and mysterious appearance on horseback of a green man, dressed in green, toting a very large axe. He mocks the bravery of Arthur's court and issues a challenge to trade blows with the axe. Arthur or his proxy gets to hit him once with the axe on the neck; should he survive, he gets to strike back a year later, at his Green Chapel. Plainly, it is Gawain who accepts.

The story begins: “Sîn þe sege and þe assaut watt sesed at Troye...Fro riche Romulus to Rome ricchis hym swyべ...And fer ouer þe French flod Felix Brutus / On mony bonkkes ful brode Bretayn he settez...[Since the siege and the assault was ceased at Troy...Noble Romulus hurried in haste to Rome...and from over the French Sea Felix Brutus / On many broad hills established Britain...]

Thus the Gawain poet opens his late fourteenth century text with a direct reference to the contemporary popular tales of ancient Rome and Troy, tying his tale to the long history of chivalry. For our purposes, it is also advantageous to note that the two cities also fit neatly into more spiritual medieval thought as constructs of men isolated from God, doomed to fall. The presentation of the Christmas feast follows, presenting a series of worldly pleasures. “With rych reuel orygt and rechles merþes. Per tournayed tulkes by tymez ful mony, [with rich revel aight and carefree mirths. There tournayed men many times]” “court caroles to make, [making court carols]” and a feast that is “ilchy ful fiften dayes. [equally full for fifteen days].”

Were the simple pleasures of that high feast not enough to represent a worldly and artificial society, we are also treated to perhaps the first example of product placement in a popular medium; Guinevere sits on “þe dere des, dubbed al aboute, / Smal sendal besides, a selure hir ouer / Of tryed toluze, and tars tapites innogh. [the precious dais, fully adorned / fine silk all about. A canopy over her / made of famous ‘Toulouse cloth, and Tartar tapestries plenty].”

Even after the challenge of the Green Knight, we are told that Gawain is “dubbed in a dublet of a dere tars [dressed in a doublet of precious Tartar cloth,]” in addition to lavish descriptions of his clothing and raiment. The pleasures of the court thus not only appeal to all of the senses, but make direct reference to specific locations within the world of man. Before he leaves the court, Gawain is in the epitome of courtly, and therefore worldly, preoccupation. In Arthur’s court, everything, even the presentation of adventures, is centered on immediate gratification and theatrical presentation. Upon the exit of the Green Knight, Arthur can only remark on the entertainment of the moment to his queen:

‘Dere dame, to-day demay yow neuer; 
Wel bycomes such craft vpon Cristmasse, 
Laykyng of entreludez, to laþe and to synge, 
Among þise kynde caroles of knytgez and ladyez. 
Neuer þe lece to my mece I may me wel dres, 
For I haf sen a selly, I may not forsake.’
He glent vpon Sir Gawen, and gaynly he sayde, 
‘Now, sir, heng vp þyn ax, þat hatz innogh hewan.’

[‘Dear Dame, today be not dismayed; 
Such dramatics is pleasing on Christmas, 
Entertainment of interludes, to laugh and to sing, 
Among these brotherly carols of knights and ladies. 
Nevertheless to my meal may I now hary myself, 
Since I have seen such a sight, I cannot deny.’
He glanced at Sir Gawain and aptly said, 
Now, Sir, hang up thine axe, with which you 
have hewn enough.’]

Drawing back to our argument, Arthur’s court has lost its way. One of his knights, however, has had thrust upon him a chance to find his own.

Gawain’s journey to the Green Chapel is a physical reflection of his spiritual journey. Considering again notion of quest described above, Gawain enters into nature in an attempt to find the right path. At this point in the tale, his success is hardly assured. This tension is reflected in the description of his heraldic symbol, “a syngne þat Salamon set sumquyle... a figure þat haldez fyue poyntez [a sign that Solomon established sometime past... a figure that had five points].” This sign has a number of symbolic attributes. The five points reflect Gawain’s faultlessness “in his fyue wyttez, [his five senses]” just as it represents “þe fyue wundez / Pat Cryst kagt on þe croys. [the five wounds / that Christ caught on the Cross].” Gawain’s crest represents not only the devices through which he can fail or succeed, but also gives a hint to the right path; Gawain is now the knight-errant in a decision-making process. Will he choose spiritual or worldly rewards?

Gawain travels on a continuum. It is only fitting that the way station on his journey is a place that represents both the artificial and the natural, the castle of Hautdesert, and that Gawain is again at court during the Christmas celebrations. This court is of extreme importance in the analysis of Gawain’s journey; Hautdesert functions on two levels. It is both the locus of final temptations before Gawain completes his end of the pact, and the bridge between civilisation and nature. Like Camelot, the castle is richly decorated:

A brygt bower, þer beddyng watt noble, 
Of cortynes of clene sylk wyth cler golde hemmez, 
And couertorez ful curious with comlych panez 
Of bryþe blauener aboue, enbrawded bisydez, 
Rudelez rennande on ropeze, red golde ryngez, 
Tapitez tygt to þe wege of tuly and tars, 
And vnder fete, on þe flet, of folgande sute.

[A bright bower, with fine bedding, 
With curtains of clean silk with beautiful golden hems, 
And coverlets skillfully fashioned with fine fur panels 
Made of fine ermine above, embroidered also, 
Curtains running on ropes with red gold rings, 
Tapestries tight on the wall from Toulouse and Tartary.]

Situated in the deep forest, Hautdesert is an island of civilisation, and Gawain is once again lured to a place of worldly and artificial comfort. However, to Gawain’s credit, it is not as much material desires, but a challenge
to his prowess in such a world that draws him into sinful behaviour. Gawain's courteous behaviour is questioned, and he finds himself unable, even at the cost of behaving discourteously, to allow this. To further this tension, Gawain agrees to a pact with his host: the host goes out hunting during the day whilst Gawain remains in; at dinnertime, the two gentlemen will trade whatever trophies they won. Gawain is now bound twofold to his host: the gift of herbourgage (that is, to provide accommodation, to accept and protect the guest) begun when his host accepted him into his court and provided him with shelter and protection, demands obedience as does the new promise of traded gains. In this game, the medieval audience recalls the bonds that tie man to God: God, like the host, provides sustenance. So too does God, through the symbolism of the universe, promise spiritual reward through the natural world to those that repay Him by living rightly.

In the third part of the poem, Gawain faces his temptation. The transitions from the scenes of the hunt and the scenes in the bedroom not only mirror each other, but continue to express the liminal area that Gawain now inhabits. As the baron hunts, Gawain is hunted by the baroness, who declares that a man whose honour and “hendelayk [are] hendely praysed, [courtesy are courteously praised]” should now prove his skills in the romantic arts. In the first two interludes, Gawain manages to escape with a kiss, which he dutifully gives to the host in return for the beast of the hunt. Although Gawain does his best to resist, the court of worldly pleasures finally overcomes him with the promise of salvation. However, it is not the salvation of the soul, which is the true quest that Gawain takes, but salvation of the body; through the garter of the baroness, her final gift to him, Gawain is ensured that the axe blow will not harm him. It is in hopes of this protection that he fails on his third trial, unable to give to the baron what he received. Rather, he leaves Hautdesert with his secret shame. Despite this failure, the quest is not yet lost; the audience would appreciate the infinite love of God, who will allow the fallen man any number of chances for redemption. Like Adam, our knight is a man cast out and lost; like mankind, he is granted another chance for grace. Gawain, in the long nights leading to this moment has had time to reflect on his past actions. We see at this point that Gawain has indeed begun to move from a world of artifice, in which failure results in shame before peers, to a world of true vision, in which it leads to guilt before God. Gawain's final severance from this courtly world occurs when his guide to the Green Chapel makes him an offer:

"For py, gode Sir Gawyn, let þe gome one, And g0z away sum oþer gate, vpon Goddez halue! Cayrez bi sum oþer kyth, þer Kryst mot yow spede, And I schal hyʒ me hom agayn, and hete yow yfre Par I schal swere bi God and alle his gode halgez, As help me God and þe halydam, and oþez innoghe, Pat I schal lelly yow layne, and lance neuer tale Pat euer ge fondet to fle for freke þat I wyst."

['Therefore, good Sir Gawain, let the man alone, And go away by some other road, for God’s sake! Ride to some other land, may Christ speed you, And I shall hurry me home again, and I promise you, further, That I shall swear by God and all his good saints, As God helps me and the holy relics, and plenty of oaths, That I shall loyally conceal you, and never let out the tale That you ever hurried to flee from that man I know.]

Here we find Gawain protected from shame, yet he refuses the offer: "Bot helde þou hit neuer so holde, and I here passed / Founded for ferde for to fle, in fourme þat þou tellez, / I were a knyght kowarde, I mygg not be excused. [But no matter how loyally you held that I fled here / Hurried for fear to flee, like you said, / I would be a coward knight, and would not be forgiven.]" Gawain has thus interiorised his shame, and realises that it is not the
appearance, but the reality of a situation that defines its nature. Only he would know of his cowardice, but this does not fit with his concept of knightly virtue. Of course, we can also question his motivations; after all, underneath his armour, he still wears the girdle given to him by the barones. Upon making his decision, his guide leaves him, and he goes forward into the forest alone.

His encounter with the Green Knight, then, needs little more than brief outline. Gawain must now face a final test, administered at axe-edge by Bertilak, the Green Knight. The swings of the axe mirror the tests in the court, but function in reverse. On the first two, Gawain panics and flinches from the blade, but at the third, Gawain no longer fails, and upon receiving it (little more than a nick), admits his cowardice and deception. The tone takes on a highly religious form. Bertilak declares that Gawain is “confessed so elene, [cleanly confessed]” having borne “pe penaunce apert of pe poynct of [his] egge [the open penance of the point of his ax-edge].”

As is seen, however, the efforts of a single knight do not necessarily benefit the entire court. In a dark finale, the poet presents the blind court of Camelot, which finds in Gawain's quest only a cause for celebration, not personal reflection. To emphasise this point, the poet ends with the description of Troy: although Gawain may have found his way, the court is still lost.

Moving from pessimism to pessimism, we can turn to a contemporary work that despairs at chivalry ever finding the right path. The Alliterative Morte Arthure will present a court that is similar in extravagance to the court of the Gawain poet, but is very clearly warlike and bloodthirsty. In the AMA, the quest for glory supersedes even the desire for pleasure, and the results are grisly. It tells the story of King Arthur's court upon receiving a demand for tribute by the Roman emperor. Arthur, convinced that he should be subject to no ruler, chooses instead to go to war, kill the emperor, and take the imperial crown.

The poet opens with a semi-ironic dedication: “In Nomine Patris et Fili et Spiritua Sancti. Amen pur Charite. Amen. [In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Sprit. Amen for Charity. Amen]” The virtue of charity was placed in the medieval hierarchy above all others; a charitable man's love of God obliged him to place all other men before oneself. This virtue, however, plainly receives little attention through the rest of the poem. Unlike Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, which began with a reference to Troy, Rome, and Britain; the AMA is far more direct: Arthur, confronted by emissaries of the Emperor Lucius, decides to claim the empire for himself. The dressing for war is dwelt on in obsessive fashion, as the various knights gather their forces and they prepare to leave Britain. In this action, we see a failure on the part of Arthur. Driven by a desire for glory, Arthur chooses to abandon his kingdom, leaving it in the hands of a regent, his son Mordred. Arthur is driven by avarice and vainglory, the vices opposing charity. This point is made quite clear by Mordred, who recognizes his own inability to rule:

“I beseech you, sir, as my sib lord, That ye will for charitee chese you another. For if you put me in this plitt, your pople is deceived. [I beseech you, Sir, as my kindred lord, That for charity you will choose another, For if you put me in this plitt, your pople will suffer.]”

Arthur will not hear of the request, however, and responds with an unjust threat of power and retribution: “forsake not this office; / That thou ne work my will, thou wot what it menes. [forsake not this office; / If you do not do my will, you know what will happen.]”

Unlike Gawain, Arthur not only enters nature but combats it blindly. It is this, more than anything else, which ensures his failure. The first confrontation with nature that Arthur faces is the battle with the giant of Mont St-Michel, a foul beast that holds the surrounding area in fear, a kidnapper, a rapist, and a murderer, who ghoulishly wears a coat of the beards of kings whom he has killed. Arthur enters into direct combat and wins. The giant represents the pitfalls of a threatening nature that can trap those that rush blindly. The giant may (and should) be defeated, but in doing so, the wise knight will be led closer to grace. That Arthur fails in this entirely is made clear; upon defeating the giant, he declares, “Have I the kirtle and the club, I covet nought elles. [I’ll have the girdle and the club, I want nothing else]” In one sense Arthur clearly lies, because he commands his shipmen to take “All the much tresure that traitour had wonnen, [all the treasure that the traitor had won]” in another, his remark indicates that Arthur wishes to become the giant, lost in the boundary-world of nature. Although he still recognises the giant as evil, Arthur is also clearly drawn to his strength.

After taking Rome, Arthur displays fully this blood-thirsty change. Although he has accomplished his potentially worthy goal, he is now driven by vengeance, and travels about the whole of the continent, destroying cities, until finally he reaches the level of wickedness equal to the giant's:

“Walles he welt down, wounded knightes, Towres he turnes, and tourmente the pople, Wrought widowes full wlonk wrotherayle singen… And all he wastes with war there he away rides…”

[He cast down walls, wounded knights, Toppled towers, and tormented the people, Made widows woefully keen… And after wasting everything with war he rides away…]

The bloodshed continues, finally reaching Arthur’s own allies. Whilst away on his rampage, Mordred has gone into rebellion, seized Guinevere, and prepared to fight against Arthur to keep the British throne for himself. The knights of the Round Table die in battle against Mordred, and even after witnessing the savagery and unnecessary deaths, Arthur the Giant-King is unable to see where he turned astray, blaming to the end the treachery of Mordred.
As must be remembered, the journey into nature is a journey dependent on sight: in nature, one saw the word of God. Arthur, unfortunately, is clearly blind, and he thus rages and fights, but never sees the signs of God. The poet of the AMA holds that chivalry is too far divergent from pious behaviour to ever reconcile with it. Although the story still shows the journey, as in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, it shows the very large traps that snare the knighthood because of their unending thirst for glory and riches. For this poet, like the Rome that Arthur wishes to conquer, chivalry is cursed to remain always the city of fallen men.

iii.

Finally, in order to see what may happen should a knight be so powerful in the world that he chooses to lose himself, not in nature, but in the material world, we can turn to the opinion of a knight, Sir Thomas Malory, also an author who compiled (and altered) a tremendous volume of Arthurian stories. Although Malory was working from French sources, it is not too much to presume that in translation, Malory would either not understand and thus include, or omit, those sentiments which were contrary to his own. In the situation that we will look at, it is likely that Malory understood what the text was saying, if not the previous authors’ attitudes towards it. This is the theme of Lancelot’s prowess and its ability to subvert the will of God in the world. Though the concept of trial by combat (that is, the determining of guilt or innocence by a duel between the parties involved or their proxies) was on the wane, it is clear in the whole of Malory’s works that combat was still considered a worthy way to settle a legal dispute. It was presumed by the medieval man that God would grant victory to him whose cause was just. In the selection we will examine, the Morte Arthur, the adulterous affair between Lancelot and Guinevere is revealed to Arthur by Mordred. Lancelot breaks from the court to do battle against the Round Table in defence of Guinevere’s honour.

At the very outset, the king himself brings up the possibility that Lancelot might surpass the will of God:

Sir Launcelot is an hardy knight, and ye all know that he ys the beste knyghte amonge us all, and unless he be takyn with the dede he woll fight with hym that brynth the noyse, and I know no knight that ys able to mach hym.

Arthur clearly believes that unless if there is visible proof that Lancelot is guilty, his strength in battle will outdo any that challenge him. At this point, Malory introduces the idea slowly. Arthur has not said that Lancelot can win a trial by combat, only that Lancelot will battle any who make an accusation, and that it will prove to be a difficult battle. The first direct reference to a judicial trial is made by Lancelot himself. After he is "takyn with the dede," he rescues Guinevere from the stake (in the process slaying the unarmed brothers of Gawain) and retreats to his castle, Joyous Guard. Under siege, he declares himself his wish to prove himself in combat:

I shall...prove it through combat with any knight that lives...that my lady, Queen Guenevere, is as true a lady as any lady living for her lord, and that oath I shall make good with my hands.

Since we know that Lancelot cannot rely on truth, the audience must presume that he expects to win regardless of right—he holds faith in his “hondis,” not God. Thus, Lancelot’s prowess eclipses the natural and divine orders. From his battles with Gawain, although they are not strictly a trial by combat, one would presume that the victim of fratricide would be able to make right over an adulterer, if nature was in order. It is difficult to overestimate the fear that lurks in this subtext. If a truly powerful knight can undermine the will of God, where does that leave the weak? A knight such as this could conquer unfairly and rule unjustly, and remain unpunished. Fears such as this
were likely great in a post-Plague, post-Hundred Years' War, post-failed Crusades world. To the audience, this possibility must have seemed all too real. Another fear expressed is that in addition to challenging the will of God, an overly powerful knight might succeed in challenging the secular order. When Lancelot retreats from Camelot, he takes many of his kinsmen with him. With him also go men that admire his skill. In a discussion with Arthur, Gawain makes the point explicitly, that “muche peple drawyth unto hym, as I here say. [many people are drawn to his cause, I say here]” 4c According to Gawain, prowess has now eclipsed rank and regal authority—Arthur's rule (which, lest we forget, was divinely sanctioned), now falls because of a rebellious and powerful knight.

In Malory, we see a less spiritual and more secular address on the interplay between nature and chivalry. There is no journey to grace, but we still see a threat that worldly glory can supplant the grace and will of God.

iv.

Fourteenth and fifteenth century England was by no means of one mind on the relationship between worldly and spiritual glory. In discussing these three pieces, however, we are able to confirm the framework with which we began. In the medieval mind, nature is both treacherous and promising, grace is both evident and difficult to attain, and civilisation is both safe and false. The journey into nature is one made by a man who is locked in civilisation and seeks a greater fulfillment. Unfortunately, the journey is by no means easy, and we have identified three possible traps for the knight-errant. The first is that he might be too easily lured back to civilisation. The second is that the knight might become lost in nature, and remain both outside of grace and outside of civilised behaviour. The third is that the knight might realise the power that he has and abandon all together the quest he wanted to undertake, remaining as a dangerous lord within the world of man.

These texts are written to address this audience of knighthood, and in each, we see avocations and admonitions to this audience. It is too imprecise to state that the only purpose of these texts was didactic. Each is an important contribution to the corpus of medieval English literature because of the depth of its meaning, its variety of interpretation, and, of course, entertainment. Nevertheless, at the same time that we try to find what the texts tell us, we cannot forget what these texts were trying to tell their original readers. The fourteenth century was one of great wars and greater death. It is clear that people of all classes would be led to considering what was waiting for them after their death; the adherents to chivalry were by no means immune to this concern.


   b. Lines 40-44.
   c. Lines 75-77.

   a. Lines 681-683.
   b. Lines 691-692.
   c. Line 1191.
   d. Line 1214.
   e. Lines 3152-3156.

   a. Pg. 674.
   b. Pg. 688.
   c. Pg. 687.