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Motion in Late Medieval English Literature:
Impulse, Randomization, and Acceleration

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This dissertation was conceptualized and created in a variety of states of motion over the course of several years; some were large and some small in scale, but the writing and research process was rarely, if ever, in stasis. My initial interest in space and motion, and many of the primary tenets of this project, were shaped during movement through space: cycling, driving, walking along and wading through the rivers of Michigan and Nebraska, scrambling through the mountain ranges of California, Colorado, Wyoming, Washington, and (briefly) Scotland, and a time of wandering in 2010 across England, Scotland, and Wales with my wife, Rita. On a smaller scale, many of its sentences were generated while pacing, whether in the warm and discourse-rich environment of the University of California, Riverside or in my home, where my cat, Hamlet—through the twitching of ears and paws while dreaming and sudden shifts from sleeping to running and leaping—was a constant reminder that stillness is only motion suspended.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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by

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This dissertation examines motion as a literary trope in several late medieval English texts. The types of movement examined here fall into three categories: physical motion recurring in narrative, mobility of textual form that produces the phenomenon of motion in the reader or listener, and the variety of movements external to the narrative but related to the text. Each chapter is organized around an individual author or genre, and Chapter One explores two of Geoffrey Chaucer's early dream vision poems: *The House of Fame* and *The Parliament of the Fowls*. Attention to Chaucer's engagement with motion as a concept of natural philosophy and as a desirable state of being reveals connections between his writing and the physics of William of Ockham, and suggests the centrality of fragmentary and complex movement to Chaucer's own poetics.

Chapter Two turns to William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, analyzing its mobile, convoluted, and jarring form, the compulsive nature of its narrative motion, and the poem's involvement in extra-narrative movements—including those that were subversive

and revolutionary. Chapter Three examines movement as it appears in several fourteenth-century metrical romances, primarily surrounding the tropes of the quest and the forest. Finally, Chapter Four analyzes movement in Sir Thomas Malory's fifteenth-century *Morte Darthur* with a focus on simple narrations of travel, the aesthetics of the motion of battle and journeying, the way this text looks back to earlier romances in relation to this subject, and how it uses motion outside of the primary narrative frame to expand the vision of a randomized, always-moving Arthurian world.

The organizing contention running through these chapters is that each text studied here employs motion as a central preoccupation, that the complexity and importance given to the trope in these works relates to the philosophical and scientific context of fourteenth-century England, and that these representations and embodiments of motion tend to have similar features: complexity, fragmentation, randomization, and a form that produces the phenomena of acceleration and jarring transitions. Finally, movement is presented as an impulse: a primary state of existence independent of any defined direction or destination.

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INTRODUCTION
“NEVERTHELESS, DIVERSE MOVING THINGS ARE THERE”¹

This dissertation explores the conjunction between literature and motion in a selection of Middle English texts, most of which were written in the fourteenth century. Although chiefly a literary study, it also draws on theories of motion provided by philosophers and physicists—medieval and modern. The recent, increasingly frequent appearance of conference panels and publications related to motion in medieval literature suggest a growing interest in this topic, but at present such studies form a relatively small group.² Attention to motion in literature, however, is a natural and important offshoot of the spatial turn in literary scholarship—the increased focus on space as a subject of significance to literature, including explorations of the relationship between subject and setting, author and landscape, and the text as space, that the field has seen over the past several decades. If space is significant and productive of meaning, so is the movement of bodies through space—what William of Ockham, the fourteenth-century philosopher and physicist, called “*motu localis*” or “*motu ad ubi*.”

The most basic contention running through this project, supported by every chapter, is that a number of English writers in the fourteenth century began to create

¹ “*Tamen diversa sunt ibi moventia*.” William of Ockham, *Opera philosophica*, vol. V: *Expositio in libros physicorum aristotelis* (St. Bonaventure, New York: Editiones Instituti Franciscani Universitatis S. Bonaventurae, 1985), 626.

² The upcoming 2014 New Chaucer Society Congress in Reykjavík, for example, features a thread entitled “Movement, Networks, and Economies.” Within this category are seven motion-related roundtables and panels, including the relevant ““This World is But a Thoroughfare”: Transit, Transport, Scapes, and Flows,” on which I will present a portion of this project’s research. This high percentage of panels relating to motion in medieval literature testifies to a growing sense in the scholarly community that there is important work to be done in this area. The upcoming International Congress on Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo will also feature a panel on mobility in medieval performance. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s popular blog “In the Middle” has featured several posts in the past decade about “Bodies in Motion,” primarily analyzing medieval travel narratives.

literature preoccupied with physical movement, characterized by formal mobility, and expressive of motion as an aesthetic object. They also did so in a way that engaged with and influenced an increasingly mobile historical context. The sudden and occasionally violent mobility of the fourteenth century in England has been well established by scholars from a variety of fields and so this task is not a focus of this project, although the multidirectional interaction between literary texts and historical movements of people and ideas is discussed. This dissertation's primary interest is in literature that seems obsessed with physical movement—walking, riding, flying, rushing, chasing, wandering—and literature that creates the phenomenon of motion for the reader through its form. Seeking to understand and categorize these movements leads to more complex questions that will be approached from a variety of angles in the following chapters: what types of motions are these works engaging with and producing? How do these movements relate to the architectural and natural spaces depicted in the texts? What is the relationship between motion and language, including the development of vernacular literature? Were these writers of poetry (and, in one case, prose romance) familiar with contemporary theories of motion, and in what ways did they interact with and further these theories through their own poetics?

No two works of literature from this period engage with or create motion in exactly the same way, and it would be an irresponsible oversimplification to contend that, together, they present a consistent argument about or description of movement. Noteworthy similarities between their depictions and formal elements exist, however, that map an identifiable trend. This trend is analogous to—or in some cases, perhaps

grounded in—Ockham’s contributions to Aristotelian physics, which, although they will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter One, deserve mention here. One contribution of this English philosopher’s theory of physics, rarely studied in relation to literature, was to *complicate* the Aristotelian physical system, the status quo of physics in the Middle Ages. Ockham characterized the phenomenon of projectile motion, for example, as profoundly more complex than previous arguments had held: it could not merely be understood as a transfer of motion from the throwing hand to the object being thrown, or by the mobilizing force of the air itself, but rather as a multifaceted combination of “diverse moving things” [*diversa moventia*] exerting energy upon the object, including a kind of internal potential mobility.³ This last concept relates to another of Ockham’s contributions: the intrinsic, fundamental status of motion to all bodies, sentient or not.⁴ For Ockham, to move through space is more natural than to remain in stasis, and the only explanation or impetus required to explain movement is the distance between two points in space; if distance exists, it is natural for it to be crossed.⁵ Although moving beings with willpower can stop moving, stopping is a violent transition into a less natural state.

The works of literature studied in this project, like Ockham’s theories, depict motion as a natural and desired condition. Movement is consistently and strikingly irresistible, and one of the primary structuring forces and narrative subjects of these texts. To see this, one needs only turn to Will of *Piers Plowman*, who wanders compulsively

³ See Page 35. William of Ockham, *Opera philosophica*, vol. V: *Expositio in libros physicorum aristotelis*, 626.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 371. André Goddu, *The Physics of William of Ockham* (Leiden, The Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1984), 186, 228.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 228.

for decades outside of the dream vision and within its multiple layers, or to one of the protagonists of romance who perpetually journey and wander and who experience stasis as jarring, violent, and unnatural—true to the designation “knight-errant” (“knight-wanderer”) which first appeared, appropriately, in the fourteenth-century English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as “knyzt erraunt.”⁶ Furthermore, although a variety of kinds of movement exist in the literature of late medieval England, the works treated here share the complexity and multidirectionality of Ockham’s physics of motion. Many of these texts, on one level, seem to present themselves as unidirectional quests from one location to another—such as Will’s quest toward the tower where Truth resides, or Orfeo’s quest to the land of Fairy and back—but this potential simplicity is always fractured, complicated, divided, or convoluted. Will’s promised quest is always deferred by jarring twists and turns that lead him ever deeper into the maze of the dreams, and dreams within dreams, until the reader has no concept of concrete spatial relationships outside of motion itself. Orfeo’s journey, the trajectory of which is one of the simpler to be discussed, is interrupted by wandering and aimless rushing through the forest, and further complicated by the *ympe-tre*, a kind of spatial-temporal loop that conflates the points in space at which he began and ended, demonstrating a complex circularity of movement. Even in the narrative motion of a relatively simple romance like the *Lybeaus Desconus*, in which Geynleyn and his companions “euer [...] ryden west / Jn þat wylde

⁶ “He calde, & sone þer com / A porter pure pleasaunt, / On þe wal his ernd he nome / & haylsed þe knyzt erraunt.” *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. Sir Israel Gollancz, 2nd ed., Early English Text Society (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), lines 807-10.

foreste / To-ward Synadowne,” the desire to reach the destination is subordinated to a vaguer desire to continually wander, to “wende,” “wyth-oute dwellynge.”⁷

All of the major texts explored in this dissertation depict motion as compulsive and, to varying degrees, randomized. Their literary form also embodies and recreates movement that can be accurately described as “fragmentary,” “multidirectional,” “convoluted,” “random,” “irresistible,” and often “accelerating.” Together, these representations of motion hint at a set of conceptual frameworks shared by a group of disparate authors. Their works present motion as fundamental to human life, but more than this: they present the perspective that simple philosophical models or narrative trajectories are insufficient to express the network of movements that characterize existence. Exploring motion in these works, and the texts’ interaction with contemporary theories of motion, provides access to their spatial and aesthetic complexity, suggests links between medieval and postmodern literary experience, and helps to illuminate the significance of repeated tropes of movement that are sometimes glossed over as one-dimensional spatial descriptors, such as Malory’s many permutations of the phrase “and they rode into a depe forest.”⁸ These medieval texts share the perspective that the experience of the world is best expressed in motion, rather than through a static map of positions in space.

⁷ M. Mills, ed. *Lybeaus Desconus*, Early English Text Society (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 544-46, 245-46.

⁸ Eugene Vinaver and P. J. C. Field, eds., *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, 3rd ed., 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990). See Pages 238-39.

METHODOLOGY: THEORIES OF MOTION

In the past fifteen years, several critical studies have appeared that are united by their conviction that motion is where we should begin when seeking to express the human experience of the universe. One particularly relevant example is Brian Massumi's *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, which shares with this project "the simple aim of integrating movement into the account."⁹ "The account" referred to here is a wide-ranging group of disciplines in the humanities, including literary theory, and his concern is to demonstrate that an approach that privileges movement and process is more relevant and true to human experience than "the kinds of codings, gridings, and positionings" with which these fields have been preoccupied.¹⁰ Phenomenological in its approach, this book begins with personal reflection: "when I think of my body and ask what it does to earn that name, two things stand out. It *moves*. It *feels*."¹¹ From this suggestion that movement is one of the two prime elements of experience, he argues for the insufficiency of static concepts of positioning—for example, through his Bergsonian analysis of Zeno's Paradox. This Paradox, frequently alluded to by medieval writers and extensively commented upon by Ockham,¹² holds that, since the trajectory of an arrow shot from a bow is a linear sequence of points, and since these points take up no space

⁹ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, North Carolina and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 13.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹² One colorful example of this can be found in William Fitz Stephen's breathless description of twelfth-century horse racing. William Fitz Stephen, *A Description of London*, trans. H. E. Butler, in *Norman London*, ed. Sir Frank Stenton and F. Donald Logan (Ithaca: New York, 1990), 54.

and are therefore infinite in number, and since the arrow must sequentially occupy each individual point, it—like all moving things—will never reach its destination. Massumi, coming to surprisingly similar conclusions as Ockham (although the medieval philosopher has no explicit place in his study), writes:

Or, if the arrow moved it is because it was never *in* any point. It was in *passage* across them all. The transition from bow to target is not decomposable into constituent points. A path is not composed of positions. It is nondecomposable: a dynamic unity [...] When we think of space as “extensive,” as being measurable, divisible, and composed of points plotting possible positions that objects may occupy, we are stopping the world in thought. We are thinking away its dynamic unity, the continuity of its movements. We are looking at only one dimension of reality.¹³

With this privileging of “passage” itself over position, Massumi, like Ockham, sees “space” as no more than a necessary means of expressing motion: “position no longer comes first, with movement a problematic second. It is secondary to movement and derived from it. It is retro movement, movement residue.”¹⁴

Massumi’s second contribution relative to this project is his assertion that the study of motion should not end at the figural or the perceptual—such as concepts of becoming and process. *Literal* movement is equally important and worthy of critical attention. He observes, for example, that even the most apparently static material objects, such as the ground itself, are in fact in motion.¹⁵ Massumi defends the importance of attention to the literal motion of bodies against the perception that this can result in

¹³ Ibid., 6.

¹⁴ Ibid., 7.

¹⁵ “Any geologist will tell you that the ground is anything but stable. It is a dynamic unity of continual unfolding, uplift, and subsidence.” Ibid., 10.

“naïve realism”;¹⁶ ignoring the literal motion of the body, he argues, is to lose the connection between our theory and our experience of reality, and to, again, artificially freeze space and subtract the dynamism from existence. Massumi helps us to see that material and immaterial movements are linked and equally significant. Similarly, the following chapters present literal movements—narrative depictions of literal motion as well as a few examples of the historical movements of people—alongside the experienced movement caused by literary form, as related parts of the same nexus of motion. In the medieval texts studied here, movement is privileged over space, passage over position, architectural structures designed to facilitate motion are emphasized and even envisioned in literal motion, and form seeks to recreate the movement with which the narratives are preoccupied.

Other recent, relevant works include *Meaning in Motion: The Semantics of Movement in Medieval Art*, edited by Nino Zchomelidse and Giovanni Freni, and Angus Fletcher’s *Time, Space, and Motion in the Age of Shakespeare*. The prior is a collection dedicated to the argument that studying movement is critical to understanding the experience of any art form, especially in the Middle Ages because of the importance of ritual and performance. It also provides a useful division of the subject of movement into three parts: “the object in motion, the moving viewer, and movement in the mind.”¹⁷ As in this dissertation, these parts are not treated as discrete experiential forms, but as artificial categories to aid in the study of the same network of motion. Fletcher’s book is

¹⁶ Ibid., 1.

¹⁷ Nino Zchomelidse and Giovanni Freni, “Preface,” in *Meaning in Motion: The Semantics of Movement in Medieval Art*, ed. Nino Zchomelidse and Giovanni Freni (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010), vii.

more historical in focus, arguing for a point in time at which motion became increasingly integral to all layers of human experience, prominently including literature—“a broad-based radical change in fundamental attitudes, a shift generated by the rise of early modern science.”¹⁸ Although, on a basic level, every chapter of this project explicitly or implicitly seeks to demonstrate the wide-ranging significance of motion to literature and existence at a much earlier date, Fletcher’s book nonetheless effectively argues for the need for studies of motion in literature and provides a number of relevant insights.

Fletcher expresses his surprise, for example, at the gap in scholarship about motion: “not since earlier major scholars [...] has the problem of motion been imagined to constitute the central cultural issue it must surely be.”¹⁹ Despite his focus on early modern science and literature, organized in part around Galileo’s evocative statement (probably apocryphal) to the Inquisitors, referring to the world: “‘eppur si muove’—‘and yet it moves,’” he also analyzes certain medieval theories of motion as critical developments toward modern physics.²⁰ Fletcher shares the conviction with Massumi that motion is central and basic to existence. “Human nature, like natural philosophy, broadly construed,” he writes, “would not be what it is without a predominant role given to movement and motion of all kinds. The human body moves, and we call it *alive*.”²¹ He

¹⁸ Angus Fletcher, *Time, Space, and Motion in the Age of Shakespeare* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁰ He notes, for example, that “medieval science had made great strides in this field of the theory of motion”—primarily referring to Jean Buridan’s description of projectile motion, related to Ockham’s—and that motion was central to medieval philosophy and theology, being the subject of the first of Thomas Aquinas’ five proofs. *Ibid.*, 11, 50.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 39.

supports the assertion that the experience of reading or hearing literature read is a kind of movement, equally important and similar in kind to physical motion through space. “We say stories and poems ‘move along,’” he notes, and highlights the “vital” connection between music and poetry, a bond that is “always a matter of motion.”²² Poetry, as well as music, “has the power to move and moderate our emotions because it virtually enters the mind.”²³ Finally, he provides a four-stage “schematic picture of the way the science of motion gets transformed for poetic purposes.”²⁴ This schematic helps to substantiate the connection between theories of physics and poetry; the methodology of this project understands this as one important trajectory of knowledge—from the scientific to the literary—but also sees the poeticization of motion as a source of knowledge, and points toward the fact that authors of literary texts often look to other literature as well as personal experience as they create their depictions of movement.

As is the case for many studies of motion, including Massumi’s, the approach of this project is indebted to Deleuze and Guattari’s attention to “multiplicities, lines, strata and segmentarities, lines of flight and intensities.”²⁵ It is still more indebted, however, to the conceptualizations of motion provided by the twentieth-century philosophers Henri Lefebvre and Walter Benjamin. Lefebvre, in *The Production of Space* as well as his final

²² Ibid., 8, 37.

²³ Ibid., 37.

²⁴ First, according to Fletcher, theories of moving objects proposed by physicists are translated into human activity; second, types of action within literature generate character; third, characterizing actions are “generated in and through language”; and fourth, in the case of drama, moving action is embodied by the actor. Ibid., 38.

²⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Athlone Press, 1988), 4.

work, unpublished during his life, *rhythmanalysis*, captures the relationship between physical movement and writing. The following is a passage taken from *The Production of Space*:

Traversed now by pathways and patterned by networks, natural space changes: one might say that practical activity writes upon nature, albeit with a scrawling hand, and that this writing implies a particular representation of space [...] Paths are more important than the traffic they bear, because they are what endures in the form of the reticular patterns left by animals, both wild and domestic, and by people [...] Could it be called a text, or a message?²⁶

Lefebvre understood the importance of roads and even the most minor paths as the writing of the movement of people on the landscape, “in a scrawling hand,” and—importantly—understood that this writing could be read. In *rhythmanalysis*, a largely unstudied work that begins with the assertion that he is entering an ongoing intellectual conversation “in the name of becoming, of movement, of mobility in general,” Lefebvre suggests that to understand a culture, one must devote oneself to studying its rhythms—the everyday movements of people, at the crucial intersection of space and time.²⁷

Lefebvre extends his study of mobility, and that of his hypothetical “rhythmanalyst,” to even the seemingly static. He characterizes his garden, for example, like Massumi’s observation about the earth, as “the apparent immobility that contains one thousand and one movements,” concluding about the person who is attuned to the rhythms of

²⁶ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2010), 117-18.

²⁷ “Everywhere where there is interaction between a place, a time, and an expenditure of energy, there is a rhythm.” Henri Lefebvre, *rhythmanalysis: space, time, and everyday life*, trans. Stuart Elden and Gerald Moore (London: Continuum, Athlone, 2004), 1.

movement: “for him, nothing is immobile.”²⁸ Through a study of movement’s rhythms, he writes, one can find the true “presence,” of a culture, and he sees this as more the work of a poet than a statistician because it is of “aesthetic import.”²⁹

The importance of architectural structures as records and facilitators of movement that Lefebvre points us towards is a critical aspect of this project, as is the contention that writing and motion are linked: that physical movement can create a text, and that a text can embody movement. In addition to this, the observational method suggested in *rhythmanalysis* influences this dissertation’s approach to texts: to access significance, it engages with even seemingly minute and insignificant rhythms and narrations of motion, which, in the medieval texts in question, often reveal motion within apparent stasis. In this, they resemble Lefebvre’s garden: still from a distance but, observed closely, humming with “a thousand and one movements.”³⁰

The influence of Benjamin is perhaps more poetic than theoretical, in part because it is derived from his labyrinthine “text” *Das Passagen Werk—The Arcades Project*. This collection of notes from Benjamin’s thirteen-year period of walking the Paris Arcades (from 1927 to 1940) was finally published in 1982, and it provides some of our most powerful and allusively rich depictions of wandering. He narrates, for example:

The way brings with it the terrors of wandering [...] But the person who travels a street, it would seem, has no need of any waywise guiding hand. It is not in wandering that man takes to the street, but rather in submitting to the monotonous, fascinating, constantly unrolling band of asphalt. The synthesis of

²⁸ Ibid., 17, 20.

²⁹ Ibid., 23-24.

³⁰ Ibid., 17.

these twin terrors, however—monotonous wandering—is represented in the labyrinth.³¹

In this passage and others, which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three, Benjamin expresses wandering as an irresistible impulse—as Ockham would argue for all mobile bodies, it requires no explanation other than the distance or path itself. Elsewhere, Benjamin depicts wandering as an inherently directionless impulse, always following a convoluted path and actively resisting destination, which would result in stasis.³² Finally, a fundamental aspect of the attraction of aimless walking is in its ability to transport the wanderer into past worlds and imaginary spaces, an ability that relates directly to medieval narratives of wandering.³³ Benjamin, in this enigmatic collection of observations and allusions, provides tantalizing material that helps us access the psychological-spatial impulse underlying medieval narratives of compulsive movement along randomized trajectories.

CATEGORIES OF MOTION

Although several subgroups exist, all of the movements analyzed in this project can be divided into three primary categories: *physical movement* in the narrative, *formal movement*, related to aesthetics and literary form, and *extratextual movement*, or movement occurring in relation to, but separate from, the literary text. The third type, given the least space of the three in the following chapters because this is not primarily a

³¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1999), 519.

³² *Ibid.*, 417.

³³ *Ibid.*, 416.

historical study, includes such trajectories as the travels of the author, the mobile context of fourteenth-century England, and the politically-charged migrations of people in the second half of the century. Another important set of motions included in this category is the circulation of manuscripts and print editions, of particular importance to *Piers Plowman* and *Le Morte Darthur*. Attention to extratextual motion provides the necessary broad view, avoiding the divorce from lived experience that would result from studying these texts as if they appeared in a vacuum. These movements, furthermore, often feed into the other categories, shaping them, influencing their form, and giving them historical relevance. Much of the important work in this area—such as demonstrating the increasing mobility of fourteenth-century society—has already been performed by previous scholars, but this project will juxtapose this historical mobility with the form and content of literature, highlighting the importance of certain historical trajectories when studied in this context.

Formal motion, the second category to be explored, includes movement on two levels, both tied to the formal elements of literature, such as length of line, poetic rhythm and meter, phonetics, and large-scale structure. The first is mobility on this formal level: fluctuation between line length and meter, free experimentation with verse form, and variation in form between different manuscripts. The second is a phenomenological category: the effect of these formal motions on the reader or audience member. Some of the medieval texts studied in the following chapters are demonstrably productive of extratextual motion, acting as mobilizing forces in history; about others, we can use formal and comparative analysis to create hypotheses about their production of the

experience of motion. This group of questions—what effects do these formal elements create in the reader, and how do these phenomena map onto the text’s broader conceptualization and poeticization of motion?—is necessarily aesthetic, as well. The employment of formal motion is not separate from the works’ artistic agendas but is an integral method through which these authors communicate poetic power and beauty. This kind of movement is itself an aesthetic object, and certain medieval authors—including Alain de Lille and Geoffrey Chaucer—experimented with this link between motion and beauty, implicitly and occasionally explicitly.

The majority of movements analyzed in this project are *physical motion in narrative*; like Massumi’s work, this project operates under the principle that literal movement through space is fundamental to existence and relevant to literary and philosophical signification and the artistic impact of a text. This broad category falls under Ockham’s *motu localis* or *motu ad ubi*, and includes in this context all movement narrated: walking, riding, wandering, flying, the motion of sound (demonstrated by Aristotle and Ockham and upheld by Chaucer to be movement of air physically transferred in concentric rings), and even the movement of architectural structures, such as the spinning of the House of Rumor. All works that are the primary subjects of chapters are in Middle English, and a few Middle English words appear with particular frequency and relevance. In these works, the most prevalent verb for generalized motion is “*gon*”: “to go.” This term most commonly refers to walking, but is used to express

riding as well, or any crossing of distance; one of its primary definitions is “to move.”³⁴ Beyond its basic meaning, this term was also used in Middle English to communicate the state of human life, as in *Sir Orfeo*, in which the phrase: “to ‘gon on bodi & bones”” is used as an expression meaning “to be alive.”³⁵ This use of the verb relies on the assumption that the physical movement of the body is an essential condition of life. It is also representative of the ways in which these writers use motion as a poetic trope to explore what it means to exist in the world; one of their answers to this seems to be: “while we live, we move.”

Most frequently, however, movement is narrated through the specific, physical verbs “walken” (“walken forth,” “walken on fot,” “gon walkinge,” “yede walking”), “riden” (“riden forth,” “riden after,” “riden a gret walop”), and “wenden.” “Walken” and “riden” meant to fourteenth-century readers very much what they do now, although “riden” held certain connotations of interest to be explored in Chapter Four; *wenden* is a more general term for travel, similar to the now slightly archaic modern definition of “wend,” but typically meaning “to go on foot,” or “to wander.”³⁶ All of these terms are rich with associations—*walken* is often related to pilgrimage, for example, and *riden* to aristocratic travel and the romance quest. “*Wandren*,” however (primarily, “to wander”) communicated to a fourteenth-century readership a particularly evocative cloud of meaning. First, as mentioned in the second of six categories of meaning for the word

³⁴ *The Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. “gon,” University of Michigan, last modified April 24, 2013, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med>.

³⁵ Ibid. A. J. Bliss, ed. *Sir Orfeo*, 2nd ed., Early English Text Society (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 54.

³⁶ *The Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. “walken,” “riden,” and “wenden,” <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med>.

given in the *Middle English Dictionary*, *wandren* often involves a lifestyle, a more than temporary condition of living on the road (or, as is often the case in these texts, in the forest), without a home. Second, three of the primary definitions of *wandren* are “to go freely,” “move at will,” and “to have the power to walk, be released from lameness or paralysis.”³⁷ This association of freedom and release from paralyzing stasis, coupled with the verb’s other connotation of “aimlessness,” is consistent with the employment of the term in the texts studied here and relevant to their conceptualization of movement. Wandering is often depicted as a painful and violent process, but also freeing—preferable to the alternative (stasis) and a fundamental condition of existence to be embraced. In the case explored in Chapter Two, this is a political issue; in others, an aesthetic concern.

All of these categories of motion are interrelated. Literary form cannot truly be separated from narrative content, so narratives of physical movement are often also characterized by mobile form. Narrated motion is also directly related, especially in the case of *Piers Plowman*, to extratextual movements, and the circulation of varying manuscripts of a text that result in the fluctuation of its content is formal as well as historical motion. In the following chapters, however, they are often discussed separately for clarity and to allow for more precise analysis of their causes and effects. They all contribute, even in their diversity itself, to the conceptualization of movement as complex, fragmentary, and irresistible that characterizes these literary works. Approaching the subject of motion in literature through these three layers of movement, while it broadens the term “motion” beyond a single definition, allows for a more

³⁷ *The Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. “wandren,” <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med>.

comprehensive analysis of the interwoven network of layers of movement surrounding and enacted by each of these works. This project, therefore, operates with the conviction that literary motion is a phenomenon formed by the interrelated movement of people and texts in history, the physical movement of people, animals, and objects in narratives, and the motion embodied by and experienced through literary form.

THE CHAPTERS

Chapter One takes as its focus two of Chaucer's early dream vision poems: *The House of Fame* and the *Parliament of the Fowls*. More than any other author studied in this dissertation, Chaucer was aware of specific contemporary theories of motion and alluded to them in *The House of Fame*: certainly Aristotle's, and potentially Ockham's. Because of Chaucer's particular philosophical and literary awareness, this chapter also explores Ockham's *Brevis summa libri physicorum* and his *Expositio in libros physicorum aristotelis*, as well as Alain de Lille's *De planctu naturae*, another text relevant to Chaucer's conceptualization of motion. Chaucer's experimentation with movement in these poems is multifaceted and complex, and this chapter approaches it as three separate, but related categories: local motion in narrative, sound as motion (a category drawn from Aristotle, or Ockham, or Aristotle adjusted by Ockham), and Chaucer's "kinetic architecture."

Each of these three vectors of Chaucer's approach reveal poems that are preoccupied with motion and its interrelationship with writing, speech, roads, doors, and convoluted space. These works embody movement in their formal elements as well as

describing it, and this motion is of a particular kind: winding, often jarring and interruptive, and always multidirectional. Finally, this chapter briefly explores the role of motion as it has developed in his later work, the *Canterbury Tales*, suggesting that this experimentation with movement was a consistent project throughout Chaucer's career as an author. This chapter is unified by the contention that the poet engaged in this exploration in a philosophically and scientifically informed way, and that he was either influenced directly by Ockham's contributions to medieval physics or came to analogous conclusions while attentive to a philosophical context dominated by the ideas of Ockham and his peers. Chaucer's employment and production of motion in poetry, furthermore, is more than an intellectual exercise; instead, it is integrally linked to the aesthetic power of his writing.

Chapter Two turns to Chaucer's contemporary, William Langland, and his masterwork, *Piers Plowman*. This famously convoluted poem provides particularly fertile ground for the study of motion, and I argue that the production and representation of a specific kind of movement forms a signifying thread in a work in which one scene or line often seems to bear little relationship to another. Although its focus is a single poem, the categories of motion explored in this chapter are more wide-ranging than in Chapter One, engaging with extratextual layers in greater depth. One of these is comprised by the mobile states of "*Piers Plowman*" as multiple physical documents, circulating in manuscript pages and always a work in progress, characterized by textual *mouvance*. Another important extratextual category is formed by the real interaction between the text of *Piers Plowman*—and isolated tropes and themes within the text—and the physical

motion of people in fourteenth-century England. Its presence in revolutionary pamphlets leading up to 1381 is well documented, and this chapter proposes a connection between its preoccupation with the freedom to wander and the harsh laws prohibiting exactly this freedom, including the brutal Statute of Labourers of 1351.

The picture that emerges from this study of motion in *Piers Plowman* reveals a poem that narrates and enacts motion throughout its thousands of lines—in its omnipresent depictions of wandering, its multidirectional and circular narrative structure, its tumbling, uneven alliterative verse, and its jarring shifts between verse forms and episodes. *Piers Plowman*'s motion, as is subtly promised early in the poem when Holy Church characterizes the Fair Field as a “maze,” forms a labyrinth of seemingly endless shifts, corners, and sudden dead ends—trajectories simply broken off without warning. This motion is also dramatized as irresistible in “Will’s” compulsive wandering. Finally, this chapter shifts to Langland’s allusions to romance and romance tropes in the poem in ways that specifically relate to characteristic trajectories found in that genre—the quest, movement through the forest, and the joust—to further illuminate the pervasive role of this type of motion as a theme and poetic mode, and to forecast the subjects of Chapters Three and Four.

The second half of this dissertation explores motion in a variety of works in the romance genre; Chapter Three, specifically, includes readings of the largest number of texts: a group of fourteenth-century English metrical romances. The most extensive readings are of *Sir Orfeo*, *Emaré*, and *Ywain and Gawain*, but other romances are addressed as well. As such, it is the only chapter in this project that does not explore a

single author's expression and production of motion in literature. Here, instead, what we find are a number of works connected by a genre that was already familiar to readers in the fourteenth-century—including its generic expectations—that create and depict movement in related ways. This analysis centers on a reevaluation of two well-known romance tropes: the forest and the quest. The quest of metrical romance is its characteristic movement, around which the majority of romances are organized. The movement of the quest is typically understood as predominantly linear: in this prevalent reading, although it includes digressions, and these are often significant, it is still traceable as a trajectory from the home space to a destination (the castle of the Fisher King and location of the Holy Grail, for example). Although there are good reasons to hold this perspective, I argue that, in many cases, linearity is not the most useful model for understanding narrative or formal motion in fourteenth-century metrical romance.

Instead, this chapter depicts the trajectories of these works as randomized and convoluted tangles overlaid upon apparent linearity. The resistance to stasis displayed in these poems is so emphatic that it reveals the compulsive continuation of movement to be the narrative focus, more than any destination. The protagonists are driven by a vague impulse to go forth, after which they appear to gain momentum—an acceleration that is also often enacted in poetic form—and anything that threatens stasis or rest is increasingly avoided or rejected. Reasons for digression from the central quest always seem to present themselves and are rarely resisted; the primary quest that would maintain narrative linearity is seldom privileged above other digressions, however apparently minor. The result is a constant, multidirectional rushing, often through the forest—

revealed through these motions as a maze, or what Ockham might call “*spatium tortuosam*,” a convoluted space that necessarily convolutes motion through it.³⁸ The forest itself, taking on a narrative role, randomizes these motions by providing alternative destinations, spatial confusion, and a setting long understood to be characterized by “wood” [mad] wandering. Surreal or otherwise complex spatial cues in romance, such as the *ympe-tre* of Sir Orfeo or the basin and marble slab of *Ywain and Gawain*, further point us away from an understanding of the trajectory of the quest as linear. These texts form a body of literature that presents motion—consistent with *Piers Plowman*, *The House of Fame*, and *The Parliament of the Fowls*—as the fundamental and desired state of existence. The consistent impulse to wander and the randomization of movement for its own sake form a kinetic network, often embodied by the forest, that structures romance more than the individual quest and accounts for much of these works’ enduring aesthetic appeal.

Finally, Chapter Four turns to a single fifteenth-century romance: Sir Thomas Malory’s monumental *Morte Darthur*, included for the unique way in which it looks back at and expands upon fourteenth-century literary representations of motion. Through an analysis of Malory’s language, the narrative structure of the *Morte*, and attention to its action verbs and rhythmic depictions of travel, this chapter explores the movements that organize and drive this work. The preoccupation with motion and the ability to travel is expressed—often poignantly—in the knights’ meditations upon their horses. Similar to the metrical romances analyzed in the previous chapter, the draw to “go forth” is

³⁸ William of Ockham, *Expositio in libros physicorum aristotelis*, 409.

irresistible and requires no explanation: the justification Lancelot provides for his and his nephew's departure from the court at the beginning of the third book, for example, consists of nothing more than: ““for we muste go seke adventures.””³⁹ Habitual movement, furthermore, becomes an aspect of knightly virtue, indoctrinated from knight to knight through storytelling, and a characteristic of the knights of greatest prowess. In terms of form, in a manner reminiscent of *Piers Plowman*, the structure of *Le Morte Darthur* often creates in the reader a sense of disorganized, interruptive motion, complete with jarring transitions and fragmentary episodes. Relatedly, this romance is also the site of significant textual *mouvance*; positioned at the transition between manuscript and print culture, its production is explicitly influenced by audience expectations and the active editing of William Caxton and Wynkyn de Worde.

In comparison to fourteenth-century metrical romance, the narrative structure formed by the longer work's trajectories of movement is exponentially vaster and more convoluted. Almost all pretense of linearity is absent from Malory's text, replaced by the Forest of Adventures as its central organizing feature—a space characterized by wandering, *aventure*, interruption, interweaving plotlines, and blind, aimless rushing. In narrative terms, this forest seems to have a gravitational pull that inexorably draws in the romance's many protagonists and sets them in perpetual motion that has little relationship to destination, or to any precise location. Within this space, or network of spaces, Malory also narrates action that takes place in the “meanwhile,” a particularly evocative aspect of his depiction of movement. The perpetual chasing after the Questing Beast is perhaps the

³⁹ Vinaver and Field, eds., *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, 253.23.

most memorable example of this: a mysterious activity continually occurring outside of the frame of primary narration. The effect of this technique is that the forest becomes a richly textured, multilayered space in which motion is continually present even in the periphery—individual narratives are merely isolated trajectories momentarily focused on within a network of interweaving lines of movement. Although Chrétien de Troyes is often rightly credited with the first creation of an “Arthurian world”—as opposed to isolated stories about Arthur and his knights—Malory, through this representation and production of motion, gives the space what is perhaps its most memorable and evocative form: a tangled expanse shaped by a multitude of rapid and randomized movements extending even beyond its many narrative frames.

The role and conceptualization of movement in each of the texts studied here is unique, and this project will not minimize their differences for the sake of arriving at a unified late medieval literary vision of motion. Langland’s compulsive, spiritually-focused wandering is not Chaucer’s philosophical flight through space; the rhyming, accelerating verse of *Ywain and Gawain* does not produce the same kind of experience of motion as Malory’s interwoven prose narratives of riding. There are, however, tendencies and preoccupations that link these works together, revealing relationships between texts as disparate as *The House of Fame* and *Emaré*, *Piers Plowman* and Malory’s *Morte Darthur*. Complex networks of intersections, impulsive and directionless wandering, and jarring shifts in direction characterize the representation of motion in all of these works; linear trajectories, destinations, and all forms of stasis are rejected. Historical context and

biographical records suggest that these stylistic and narrative decisions were grounded in the lived experience of individual authors in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. These works engaged with other forms of contemporary discourse, including natural philosophy, and in some cases directly explored and sought to expand the application of medieval theories of physics to include the realms of language and poetry.

A picture emerges from the study of these texts together, although it is as multilayered and diverse as the representation of motion in the works themselves. A wide-ranging group of late medieval English authors increasingly found in motion a subject of exploration, an aesthetic object, and an inspiration for literary form and narrative content. These authors addressed the philosophical complexities of motion in new ways, and, in some cases, saw the potential for medieval developments in the physics of motion to inform literary structure, form, and meaning. These writers depicted the draw toward movement, specifically without destination or direction, as irresistible—a human impulse understood in their works to be one of the most basic, and most evocative, conditions of existence. As they explored the nature of movement, they consistently depicted convoluted and random networks of motion rather than sequential pilgrimages or linear quests. This project joins in the exploration of these moving texts, beginning with the author who engaged more directly with contemporary physics than any other represented here: Geoffrey Chaucer.

CHAPTER 1
CHAUCER’S PHYSICS: MOTION IN TWO DREAM VISIONS

John Stow’s 1598 *Survey of London* includes a section devoted to Aldgate, which begins with the following description:

The next gate in the east is called Aeldgate, of the antiquity or age thereof. This is one and the first of the four principal gates, and also one of the seven double gates, mentioned by Fitzstephen. It hath had two pairs of gates, though now but one; the hooks remaineth yet.¹

From there, the focus of the section immediately changes to a narration of the related actions of men and women, from King Edgar’s chartering of the gate, to the founding of a priory just within by “Matilda the queen, wife to Henry I,” to its destruction in the battles between King John and the barons in 1215, to its rebuilding and the later violent actions of “a riotous company of shipmen” toward the gate in 1471.² Even the descriptions of its architecture and building materials are framed within the context of human action and movement from place to place. Following a description of King John’s barons entering through the gate in 1215, Stow writes:

Robert Fitzwalter, Geffry Magnavile Earl of Essex, and the Earl of Gloucester, chief leaders of the army, applied all diligence to repair the gates and walls of this city with the stones taken from the Jews’ broken houses, namely, Aeldgate being then the most ruinous (which had given them an easy entry), they repaired, or rather newly built, after the manner of the Normans, strongly arched with bulwarks of stone from Caen in Normandy, and small brick, called Flanders tile, was brought from thence.³

¹ John Stow, *The Survey of London* (London: J. M. Dent and sons, ltd., 1912), 28.

² *Ibid.*, 28-29.

³ *Ibid.*, 29.

This gate, built of materials from all over Europe and the site of centuries of conflict, continued to be at the center of activity during the years 1374 to 1386, during which Geoffrey Chaucer had been granted “the dwelling house above the gate of Aldgate, with the rooms built over and a cellar beneath.”⁴ D. W. Robertson, in *Chaucer’s London*, points out that the road through the gate was one of the city’s principle highways and would have been busy with carts and packhorses; it was also the beginning and ending point for a variety of festive processions, including one at Midsummer on St. John’s Eve, which reports indicate involved a large portion of the population, the mayor, and “pageants, minstrels, and torches.”⁵ Derek Pearsall dramatizes the level of activity surrounding Chaucer’s dwelling during these years:

Chaucer was now back in the city where he had been brought up, in a house of his own, surrounded by the bustle and noise of the biggest manufacturing and commercial centre in the country [...] All human life passed through the gate under his dwelling, carts with iron-bound wheels carrying grain and other victuals into the city from the countryside around, and others leaving with loads of dung (like the ‘dong-carte’ about to leave at the west gate of the town in the Nun’s Priest’s Tale, VII. 3036) and the blood and entrails of slaughtered beasts. His daily walk to work on the wool quay, between London Bridge and the Tower of London, took him through some of the busiest parts of the city.⁶

Even before—as well as during—this period, we know that Chaucer lived a life of remarkable mobility, a large proportion of which was spent on the road (and on the Channel) on travels abroad and within England. During much of his life, he was involved to varying degrees with the court of Richard II, an environment that, as John M. Ganim

⁴ Martin Michael Crow, Clair Colby Olson, and John Matthews Manly, *Chaucer Life-Records* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1966), 144-45.

⁵ D. W. Robertson, *Chaucer’s London* (New York: Wiley, 1968), 48, 213.

⁶ Derek Albert Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 98.

has argued, was characterized by “portability” in its ideological and artistic expression as well as its occasionally literal state of mobility.⁷ In 1360, according to a record of a ransom paid—£16, the going rate for a *valetus*, or yeoman—Chaucer was captured in France while campaigning.⁸ Another record from 1360 tells us that Chaucer was paid to carry a letter to Calais, and as Pearsall observes, “this was not the first time, nor was it to be the last by any means, that Chaucer travelled the route by which he sent his pilgrims to Canterbury some years later.”⁹ In 1366, “Geffroy de Chauserre, escuier englois en sa compaignie trois compaignons,” was granted safe conduct from February 22 to May 24 by Charles II of Navarre, possibly in regards to a pilgrimage, possibly a secret mission of state, but certainly a long journey.¹⁰ Already in 1368, another record informs us that Chaucer received a grant to embark on a four to five week journey abroad, given two horses, 20 shillings, and £10, “enough to take him almost anywhere in Western Europe, even as far as Rome.”¹¹ The very next year, records indicate that Chaucer was abroad again on an expedition to Artois, Picardy, and Normandy from July to November as the war with France reignited, and in 1370 he was abroad yet again, in the service of the king

⁷ “The court itself seemed portable, perhaps out of necessity. Among his most memorable artistic projects were interiors, walls, and glazings. The description of the court in transit suggest the air of a travelling fair, not entirely unlike the bon voyage of the Canterbury pilgrims.” John M. Ganim, *Chaucerian Theatricality* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990), 8.

⁸ Crow, Olson, and Manly, *Chaucer Life-Records*, 23.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 19. Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 42. Pearsall also argues that “in Chaucer, there is a close relationship between his life and his works” (5).

¹⁰ Crow, Olson, and Manly, *Chaucer Life-Records*, 64. Pearsall provides commentary on this record, concluding that the pilgrimage thesis is possible but unlikely because the season during which the trip took place was not high pilgrimage season. He points out the delicate situation in the court of Navarre, and concludes that it is “likely that he was there on some kind of secret diplomatic mission.” Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 51-53.

¹¹ Crow, Olson, and Manly, *Chaucer Life-Records*, 53.

in Northern France.¹² From December 1, 1372 to May 23, 1373, he was travelling on his long and frequently discussed trading mission to Genoa and Florence, involving two full months of travel and three months in Italy.¹³ In the years 1377 to 1381, Chaucer returned to Italy once and to France several times.¹⁴

Through these rather extensive records and other documents, we know that Chaucer was a traveler, and one whose life, even between travels, was surrounded by and embodied activity and motion—especially during the years before and during the composition of his dream visions, including *The Parliament of the Fowls* and *The House of Fame*. As he composed *The House of Fame*, for example, in 1374 or sometime during the following four years, he did so in apartments positioned immediately above one of London’s busiest gates and highways, in periods between frequent international travels. The architectural structure that Chaucer places at the climax of this poem—the House of Rumor—written in this spatial position above Aldgate, consists largely of countless doors, “as fele [many] as of leves ben in trees / In somer” (1945-46).¹⁵ He imagines the constant, multidirectional passage of people and sound permeating the place through these gates, and the fact that the entire enormous structure is actually spinning (“and ever mo, as swyft as thought, / This queynte hous aboute wente, / That never mo hyt stille stente”) compounds the impression of a space that facilitates and embodies continual,

¹² Ibid., 31.

¹³ Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 102.

¹⁴ Ibid., 105-6.

¹⁵ All references to *The Parliament of the Fowls* and *The House of Fame* are from Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

complex movement (1924-26). In *The Parliament of the Fowls*, written a few years later, a gate appears again at a climactic point, highlighted for the importance of the motion that it paradoxically allows for as well as discourages through the message carved into its surface. These images make arresting conceptual connections, forming a network that is particularly significant to Chaucer's poetry: doors, thought, writing, and motion. The movements he depicts are also of a particular kind, characterized by complexity and labyrinthine, interwoven, or interrupted trajectories. These poems narrate and describe a variety of interconnected types of movement, embody mobility in their poetic form, and interrogate the nature of motion in experientially and philosophically informed ways.

“THEY HAVE THAT WHICH IS THE PRINCIPLE OR SOURCE OF THEIR MOTION WITHIN THEMSELVES”:¹⁶

WILLIAM OF OCKHAM'S THEORIES OF MOTION

Chaucer's understanding of motion, in addition to his mobile experience of life, was colored by his knowledge of the philosophical and scientific discourses of his time. The extent to which he was a “scholar” has long been the subject of debate, but there is widespread consensus that he was a well-read and educated writer.¹⁷ We know from Chaucer's allusions that he was familiar with some Scholastic philosophy and, importantly for this study, physics. In the fourteenth century, physics—including

¹⁶ “*Principium effectivum motus eorum est aliquid in eis subiective existens.*” William of Ockham, *Expositio in libros physicorum aristotelis*, 371.

¹⁷ Kathryn Lynch provides an excellent summary of this debate, beginning with Caxton and other early writers who imagined Chaucer as a philosopher, including the poet's first, stunningly inaccurate biographer John Leland, who described him as a profound scholar in the fields of logic, oratory, poetry, philosophy, and mathematics. Derek Pearsall proposes that Chaucer “was widely read, and used his reading intelligently, but he was not a scholar,” and Lynch welcomes this caution but emphasizes Chaucer's scholarly expertise. Kathryn L. Lynch, *Chaucer's Philosophical Visions* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, U. K.: D. S. Brewer, 2000), 16-17. Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 32.

prominently the physics of motion—was studied at intellectual centers like Oxford within the category of natural philosophy, and such studies were predominantly commentaries on Aristotle. In this context, the importance of the thought and writing of William of Ockham are almost undisputed, although the extent to which he should be given individual credit for “his” intellectual influence has recently been questioned, with some critics suggesting that he should be understood as one member of an academic community.¹⁸ As Paul Vincent Spade observes, “standard histories have long recognized that the three most important figures in the philosophy of the High Middle Ages were Thomas Aquinas (1224/5-74), John Duns Scotus (c. 1266-1308), and William of Ockham (c. 1288-1347).”¹⁹ Ockham’s school of thought, nominalism, is understood as having been dominant, or at least “widely discussed,” for around fifty years in the mid- to late-fourteenth-century in the intellectual centers of Oxford, Avignon, Paris, and Munich.²⁰ These centers controlled the philosophical climate of much of Western Europe, and Ockham, an Englishman, was particularly influential in England, where he experienced his most prolific period of writing (1321-1324), including his works of physics.²¹ Although he is often known for his theology and later political writings (while in Avignon and Munich), this subject was of significant interest to him, his ideas were well

¹⁸ William J. Courtenay has claimed that “Ockham is better seen not as the leader or center of movement but as one of many contemporary authors whose opinions were widely discussed, sometimes accepted, and sometimes rejected.” William J. Courtenay, “The Academic and Intellectual Worlds of Ockham,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ockham*, ed. Paul Vincent Spade (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 28. Despite this appropriate caution, Courtenay still treats Ockham’s writings as important and “widely discussed,” and most scholars still see Ockham as a more central figure than his contemporaries.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

known to the educated readership in late fourteenth-century England, and, in comparison to Scotus or Aquinas, his physical thought was particularly groundbreaking.

Aristotle's physics were the standard at the time, and Ockham supports some of these theories while radically revising others. One element that he maintains is the critical importance of motion to the understanding of existence. He engages with and confirms one of Aristotle's prominent conclusions: "for if we are ignorant of what a motion is, we are of necessity ignorant of what nature is."²² The subjects of projectile motion (the motion of a thrown object, for example), planetary/heavenly movement, and self-propelled/willed motion dominate his physics, falling under the category "*motu localis*" or "*motu ad ubi*" ("local motion," or movement through space). He begins to depart from Aristotle, however, in the details that control and describe these motions. In relation to the developing theory of inertia, for example, which required "the abandonment of Aristotelian principles," André Goddu (one of the most important modern commentators on Ockham's physics) characterizes Ockham's critique of these rules as definitively "the most devastating and significant of the Middle Ages."²³ Three related and unique aspects of his physics of motion are of particular relevance to Chaucer's poetry: his description of space, his argument about the complex forces that cause movement, and his explanation of continued, potentially perpetual, *yet irregular* motion—not only in circular trajectories

²² William of Ockham, *Opera philosophica*, vol. VI: *Brevis summa libri physicorum, Summula philosophiae naturalis, et Quaestiones in libros physicorum aristotelis* (St. Bonaventure, New York: Editiones Instituti Franciscani Universitatis S. Bonaventurae, 1974), 39. William of Ockham, *Ockham on Aristotle's Physics: A Translation of Ockham's Brevis summa libri physicorum*, trans. Julian A. Davies (St. Bonaventure, New York: The Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure University, 1989), 39. Aristotle, *Physics* III, c. 200b.

²³ Goddu, *The Physics of William of Ockham*, 228.

which had been understood as continuous since Aristotle, but even, enigmatically, in those that are *rectilinear*, or in a line with an apparent beginning and ending.

First, like Lefebvre and other postmodern theorists who characterize space as substantive and produced by movements, like the post-Einsteinian physics of space-time, Ockham rejects the idea that space is a void.²⁴ For Ockham, however, it is not real as a substance, either. The concept of place (*locus*) appears frequently in his writing, but almost always subordinated to motion. The primary function of *locus* as a concept is to differentiate movements. If place exists—for Ockham, it is a conceptual framework but not a substance—it is because it is possible to move from place to place.²⁵ The primary definition of local motion found in Ockham’s writings—representative of his nominalism—is the condition in which an object exists partially in one place and partially in another.²⁶ Ockham determines that to understand the cosmos, we should look to motion rather than space or place, although place is a critical concept. Place, such as it appears in Ockham, is not only colored or characterized by motion, but its very existence as a concept is *only* necessitated because of the existence of motion. The intertwining of space and motion is further emphasized as Ockham discusses the *shape* of space; specifically, he mentions that motion through a winding space (“*spatium tortuosam*”) is

²⁴ Ibid., 203.

²⁵ William of Ockham, *Ockham on Aristotle’s Physics*, 55. As Goddu summarizes Ockham’s ideas, “‘place’ does not exist as a substance or quality, yet we recognized that ‘place’ supplies the real conditions under which we can conceive and understand bodies and their motions”; motion is also unreal as a substance, but “real as an act and function.” Goddu, *The Physics of William of Ockham*, 215-16.

²⁶ Ockham, *Expositio in libros physicorum aristotelis*, 507-522.

irregular.²⁷ In regard to this concept of (ir)regularity, he claims that a “regular motion” is “more one than an irregular motion” [*motus regularis est magis unus quam motus irregularis*], but also, notably, that “regularity and irregularity belong to every species of motion” [*regularitas et irregularitas... convenient omni specie motus*].²⁸ This is one of many hints at a kind of plurality of motion in Ockham, in contrast to the unity and relative simplicity of the Aristotelian system—Ockham resists defining motion in a single category or as produced by a single cause, whether it be the space through which it is shaped or the forces that instigate an object’s movement.

Second, in relation to one ancient question—why does an object continue to move after it has left the hand that threw it?—Ockham introduced more complex forces than had been previously considered. A number of explanations for continued projectile motion were in circulation in this obviously pre-Newtonian century, including the idea, supported by Aristotle and Averroes, that the “throwing hand” moves air, and that this air moves the projectile (Aristotle calls this a “violent” force, moving the object and air unnaturally quickly and away from their natural places). Ockham’s response is not to directly refute this theory, but to complicate it, demonstrating that “violent” and “natural” motions, as well as intrinsic and extrinsic forces, are all involved. Chaucer’s eagle in *The House of Fame* explicitly alludes to Ockham’s partial answer to this question, found in his *Expositio in libros physicorum aristotelis*:

To this it can be said that air moves the projected not as if one moving uniformly with one motion, but because air is easily divisible, air is divided in many parts,

²⁷ Ibid., 409.

²⁸ Ibid., 411.

one of which is moved more quickly than another actual cause. And therefore one part moved with a natural motion pushes the other, and if the other succeeds, because of that the other is moved violently, which moved it moves the other either to its proper place more quickly than it is moved by itself, or to another place. And so diverse parts of diverse moved things by themselves move the projected. And then when it is asked of that moving whether it is moved from itself or from another, I say that something moving is moved from itself and something from the other, and therefore the state obtains not with respect to many things moved from themselves. And therefore, although the projected is moved by an extrinsic thing and violently, nevertheless there are diverse moving things there, which are moved of themselves and not by something extrinsic.²⁹

No one force is responsible for the continued motion of the projectile: its motion seems to be caused by its natural tendency to move to its proper place (for a heavy object, downward), the diverse and irregular divisions that appear in the air, the initial hand that threw the object, and a kind of internal impulse to continue moving. This last force is particularly noteworthy: as he writes elsewhere, “simple bodies, and all heavy and light bodies, can move on their own because they have that which is the principle or source of their motion within themselves” [*corpora simplicia et universaliter omnia gravia et levia possunt moveri ex se quia principium effectivum motus eorum est aliquid in eis subiective existens*].³⁰ This enigmatic impulse, combined with the various forces of projector and the diverse separations in the air (emphatically *not* uniform, regular, or singular) comprise a medieval theory of motion that was unparalleled at the time for its nuance and

²⁹ “*Ad hoc dici potest quod aer movet proiectum non quasi unum movens uniforme uno motu, sed quia aer est faciliter divisibilis, aer in multas partes dividitur, quarum una velocius movetur quam alia ex alia cause actuali. Et ideo una parts mota motu naturali aliam impellit, et si succedit alia, propter quod alia violenter movetur, quae mota movet aliam vel ad locum proprium velocius quam moveretur ex se, vel ad alium locum, et sic diversae partes diversae motae a seipsis movent proiectum, et tunc quando quaeritur illud movens, aut movetur ex se aut ex alio, dico quod aliquod movens movetur ex se et aliquid ex altero, et ideo est status non ad primum proiciens sed ad aliam partem aeris pulsem a proiciente, et postea ex se motam vel forte perveniendum est ad talia multa mota ex se, et ideo quamvis proiectum moveatur ab extrinseco et violenter, tamen diversa sunt ibi moventia quae ex se moventur et non ab extrinseco.*” Ibid., 626.

³⁰ Ibid., 371.

complexity. Goddu characterizes his method as an “analysis of all motions as complex,” and argues that they revealed the “arbitrariness” of the Aristotelian system, having potential that was not methodologically actualized until the seventeenth century.³¹

Finally, and relatedly, part of Ockham’s contribution to the understanding of motion is his apparent preoccupation with its persistence and continuity—but this continuity does not imply order or simplicity. This particular conviction is philosophically rigorous, but also occasionally verges on the poetic; he does not always follow through on the logical conclusions that could be drawn from his ideas, but allows them to resonate as aesthetic concepts, leaving their analytic ramifications for others to pursue. One example of this is found in his discussions of infinity. Like Aristotle, he holds that the principle infinite motion is heavenly motion, which is ordered, “one,” circular, and infinite.³² Unlike Aristotle, however, Ockham suggests that earthly motions from one defined place to another are also potentially “infinite,” resisting Aristotelian definitions of unity and completion. Although this section is ambiguous and not followed through to its logical conclusions, this contention seems to be based on an early conviction that the universe is not limited, but potentially expanding—as we now of course know with relative certainty.³³ In such a cosmos, the limits of which are in motion,

³¹ Goddu, *The Physics of William of Ockham*, 236.

³² Ockham, *Brevis summa libri physicorum*, 106.

³³ “On the other hand, there is reason to believe from Ockham’s own postulation of a potentially infinitely expanding body that even rectilinear motion is potentially infinite. Ockham had already abandoned the logical necessity of a permanently limited universe, although at any given moment the universe must be finite in extent because always susceptible of greater expansion.” Goddu, *The Physics of William of Ockham*, 192.

Ockham seems to have concluded that it is insufficient to speak of a movement as finite, even when we think we know its beginning and ending.

In his further dialogues about motion as perpetual, it becomes still clearer why he supports the claim that “if one is ignorant of what motion is, one is ignorant of what nature is.” Motion, it seems, in Ockham’s estimation is a more fundamental state to existence than rest—a fact that he emphasizes more than his predecessors. For example, although he concludes, as mentioned above, that all objects contain the principle of motion in themselves, they do *not* contain the principle of rest: the ability to stop on their own.³⁴ Although he concedes that “an animate thing can move through a space and can also stop” [*animal potest moveri per aliquod spatium est potest etiam quiescere*],³⁵ moving remains, in his analysis, more natural and less “violent” than stopping. This internally-generated motion is critical to his critique of Aristotle’s principle, expressed by Ockham as “*in omnia tali motu movens propinquum et motum sunt simul*” [in every such thing moved, the nearest moving and moved are together], meaning that, when an object is projected (for example, thrown) it needs the movement of the projector to be transferred onto it in some way to continue moving. Instead, Ockham argued that an object in motion can continue to move *of itself*, without an external mover, because all things contain this potential motion and tend toward motion.³⁶

Elsewhere, Ockham confirms this more emphatically: although he describes the diverse forces exerted that characterize certain motions, as in the lengthy passage above

³⁴ Ibid., 186. Ockham, *Exposition in libros physicorum aristotelis*, 371.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Goddu, *The Physics of William of Ockham*, 203.

regarding the division of air, such causes are not necessary to explain continued motion itself. In fact, departing from Aristotle, Ockham determined that continued, perpetual motion *requires no explanation or cause*.³⁷ Stopping requires a force; moving does not. The only explanation truly needed for motion is the distance from one place to another; for Ockham, if there is distance, it is natural for an object to cross that distance. As I will argue throughout this dissertation, no explanation for movement comes closer to expressing the often unexplained and omnipresent motions found in numerous examples of fourteenth-century English literature than this one, provided by Ockham. In summary, Ockham refuted and built on Aristotelian physics by claiming that (1) the concept of space/place is necessitated and shaped by motion, (2) motion is a network of more complex and diverse forces than had been previously believed, and (3) motion is an impulse internal to all (even inanimate) things, potentially infinite and continuous, and the tendency to cross an intervening space is more natural than to remain in stasis.

In recent scholarship, Chaucer has frequently been linked to Ockham and Ockhamism, and the poet's knowledge of at least some of the philosopher's works and ideas has been well established. Helen Ruth Andretta has related *Troilus and Criseyde* to Ockhamism, and, although Kathryn L. Lynch focuses on specific philosophical doctrines and denies Chaucer's affiliation with any single philosopher, she argues extensively for seeing Chaucer as a kind of nominalist (the school in which Ockham was the primary figure and innovator) and influenced by several of Ockham's, as well as other

³⁷ Ibid., 228.

contemporary philosophers', ideas.³⁸ A. J. Minnis, in his representation of Chaucer's philosophical climate, gives Ockham a prominent place.³⁹ The relationship between Ockham's *physics* and Chaucer's poetry, however, has received little attention. And yet, when Chaucer's works, most notably some of his early dream visions, are read with an awareness of Ockham's fourteenth-century innovations in the field of physics, a number of connections become apparent. Several of Chaucer's most unusual and memorable deployments of narrative motion, such as the House of Rumor, are enriched and elucidated through the philosophical and scientific context within which they were imagined. The following pages explore Chaucer's poeticization of movement: the ways in which his representations and deployments of motion connect to Ockham's theories as well as the ways in which Chaucer diverged and branched out from these ideas. These connections imply Chaucer's awareness of the most current science of motion in his day and highlight the sheer complexity of his approach to the subject—even as they more generally reveal the significance of movement to his poetry. The types of motion found in Chaucer's writing lend themselves to an exploration in three parts: the physical movement (and stasis) of characters and objects within the poems, the architectural structures that facilitate and alter these movements, and—as explored in many of Chaucer's works—*sound* as a type of motion.

The two primary subjects of this study are dream vision poems, *The House of Fame* and *The Parliament of the Fowls*, the first written in 1374 and the second between

³⁸ Lynch, *Chaucer's Philosophical Visions*, 15. Helen Ruth Andretta, *Chaucer's Troilus and Creseyde: A Poet's Response to Ockhamism* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997).

³⁹ A. J. Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1982).

1380 and 1382, both during Chaucer's years of living above Aldgate. In the free imaginative space of the dream poem, "Chaucer's physics" take on their most exploratory, philosophical, and occasionally radical forms. In these poems, especially in the unfinished and structurally rough *House of Fame*, Chaucer begins to explore some of the types of poetic motion that appear more subtly in his later poetry, and may relate to his famous choice to set the *Canterbury Tales* on the road and to allow for such mobility of form and content in its network of stories. Although both dream poems begin with a narrator in a static space, they quickly launch into the motion of the dream, and movement—its importance, its form, and what it means to move—becomes one of the main subjects of the narratives.

MOTU LOCALIS: PHYSICAL MOTION IN CHAUCER'S NARRATIVE

In the beginning of *The House of Fame*, as soon as "Geffrey"—said to be as exhausted as one who had just taken a pilgrimage⁴⁰—falls asleep, we as readers arrive at a Temple of Venus, "ymad of glass" (120). The shift to this place is instant; he is suddenly "mette" with the temple, in the moment of entering the dream (119). Once inside, however, the narrative slows to a crawl, losing action in favor of description. The dreamer is confronted with:

Moo yimages
Of gold, stondyng in sondry stages,
And moo ryche tabernacles,
And with perre moo pynacles,
And moo curiouse portrytures,

⁴⁰ "And file on slepe wonder sone, / As he that wery was forgo / On pilgrimage myles two / To the corseynt Leonard" (116-17).

And queynte maner of figures
Of olde werk, than [he] saugh ever.
(121-27)

The repetition of words for “pictures”: “ymages,” “portrytures,” and “figures,” emphasize the stillness of the place. Rather than a living Venus, as we see in *Parliament*, this place is only identified as her temple by her “portreyture” on a wall, “naked fletynge in a see” (131, 133). Not only are these images static, they are specifically referred to as “olde werk,” building on the developing image of a shining and rich, but abandoned, museum. The dreamer’s response to this place, considering what we know of him from the poem’s opening, makes perfect sense: he reads, at great length. A huge portion of the poem (some 316 lines from 151 to 467) are devoted to the story of Dido and Aeneas, a part of which is present in still images on the walls of the temple. The manner in which this story is narrated already betrays a preoccupation with *images* of movement and change: the tempest—so vividly painted and fierce in its motion “that every herte might agryse [tremble] / To see hyt peynted on the wal”—and the attribution of swiftness to “wikke Fame,” for example (211-12, 350). This story is also, however, the slowest moment in a rapidly-paced poem—narrative action is replaced here with hundreds of lines of reflection and digression while the dreamer lingers—and represents the dreamer’s static meditation upon emphatically still “portreytures.”

Line 476, “but now wol I goo out and see,” marks the turn of this dream vision; from this point forward, Chaucer’s narrative will stand in sharp contrast to what we see in Venus’ Temple of Glass: motion replaces stillness, newness replaces “old werke,” and fierce, sharp moments of beauty replace lingering meditation. The narrator’s progress

here, as Chaucer turns away from old stories, is reminiscent of Ockham's complication and revitalization of the ancient Aristotelian theoretical system of motion. The dreamer's exit "at the wicket" breathes life into the poem and, at this point, a powerful embodiment of the connection between motion and aesthetics explodes into the vision as Jove's eagle—directly mirroring Dante's philosophical eagle in the *Paradiso*—dives toward Geoffrey where he wanders in the empty plain surrounding the temple. This moment is significant enough for Chaucer to treat it as a kind of cliffhanger, beginning to narrate its arrival at the end of Book I, prolonging the suspense of its descent with the proem of Book II, and allowing it to continue nineteen lines later:

This egle, of which I have yow told,
That shon with fethres as of gold,
Which that so hye gan to sore,
I gan beholde more and more
To se the beaute and the wonder;
But never was ther dynt of thonder,
Ne that thing that men calle foudre,
That smot somtyme a tour to powder
And in his swifte comynge brende,
That so swithe gan descende
As this foule, when hyt beheld
That I a-roume was in the feld.
(529-40)

These lines together communicate a multi-layered flash of speed, violence, beauty, and wonder. The eagle's descent is overlaid with the images of a flame, a percussion of thunder, and a lightning bolt reducing a stone tower to dust. In sharp contrast to the stillness emphasized by the "ymages" and "portreytures" of the Temple of Glass, words of movement and speed dominate these lines: "sore," "smot," "swifte," "comynge," "swithe," "descende," "a-roume." All of these images serve the purpose of emphasizing

the delayed comparative “so swithe” [swift]—the eagle is faster than both the thunder and the bolt of lightning.

In the face of this superlatively swift and violent descent, *The House of Fame*'s Geoffrey is understandably terrified. As he is “hente” in the eagle’s “grymme pawes stronge” and lifted into space, he is “astonyed,” “asweved,” and experiences such “drede” and “gret affray” that he passes into unconsciousness (541, 549, 551). At the same time, his experience of the eagle’s shining descent is encapsulated in the line “to se the beaute and the wonder” (533). This moment, characteristic of Chaucer’s poetic representation of movement, can be more fully understood in light of an earlier work of direct and explicit influence upon Chaucer: Alain de Lille’s *De planctu naturae*. Chaucer, in *The Parliament of the Fowls*, alludes directly to this widely-read prosimetric Latin dream poem, written in late twelfth-century France. Although we cannot know when Chaucer first read this work, its unusual phenomenology of movement bears striking similarity to that found in *The House of Fame*. Alain was writing during the development of the Scholastic tradition, and I suggest that, in this work, he explored an aesthetic that we can understand as distinct from those proposed by Vincent de Beauvais, Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas, and other philosophers and theologians who dominated the intellectual climate of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.⁴¹

⁴¹ One aspect of this complex Scholastic aesthetics that I argue is emphatically absent from certain medieval texts (here, Alain’s *De planctu* and Chaucer’s dream visions) is the focus on the use-value and goodness of beauty. Umberto Eco observes that “this integration of values makes it difficult for us to understand nowadays the absence in medieval times of a distinction between beauty (*pulchrum, decorum*), and utility or goodness (*aptum, honestum*).” He also notes that, according to the Scholastic authors of the *Summa* of Alexander of Hales (1245), “beauty exists in a thing as the splendor of its form, the form which orders the matter according to canons of proportion, and which in shining forth reveals the ordering activity.” Albertus Magnus, in a commentary that was once attributed to Thomas Aquinas, defines beauty

In *De planctu naturae*, a text ostensibly devoted to lamenting the “unnatural” activities and creations of humankind shifts quickly to an aesthetic meditation⁴²—one that is profoundly preoccupied with communicating not only images of beauty, but the experience of beauty. In doing so, it amplifies its original theme, but it does so through expressions of the phenomenology of nature rather than direct condemnation of the “unnatural” (the mode in which the narrative begins). Despite—or, in some ways, because of—its intricate, puzzling, and tangled Latin, it is a poem of intense movement.⁴³ The shift in this work from didacticism, which occurs almost immediately, is the arrival of Nature, who descends like Chaucer’s eagle and is framed from the beginning in terms of spatial movement that fascinates Alain’s dreamer: “*mulier ab impassibilis mundi penitiori dilapsa palatio*” [a woman glide[s] down from an inner palace of the impassible

in the following way: “the nature of the beautiful consists in general in a resplendence of form, whether in the duly-ordered parts of material objects, or in men, or in actions.” Furthermore, “just as corporeal beauty requires a due proportion of its members and splendid colours [...] so it is the nature of universal beauty to demand that there be mutual proportions among all things and their elements and principles, and that they should be resplendent with the clarity of form.” Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 15, 25, quoting Albertus, *De pulchro et de bono*, in *S. Thomae aquinatis opera Omnia*, ed. Roberto Busa (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzbook, 1980), 43-47. The concept that beauty is found in harmony, proportion, and symmetry is also found in the writings of Galen, Vitruvius, and Vincent de Beauvais in his *Speculum naturale*. Eco describes this conception of beauty as “formal, almost mathematical.” Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, 29. This static aesthetics (Vitruvius explicitly mentions that beauty arises from proportions around a *fixed* point) excludes the morally ambiguous, unpleasant, provisional, incomplete, and chaotically mobile.

⁴² What Alain sees as the blurring of gender in his society is especially troubling to him. The work begins, in Elegaic meter (in translation): “I turn from laughter to tears, from joy to grief, from merriment to lament, from jests to wailing, when I see that the essential decrees of Nature are denied a hearing, while large numbers are shipwrecked and lost because of a Venus turned monster, when Venus wars with Venus and changes ‘hes’ into ‘shes’ and with her witchcraft unmans man.” Alanus, *The Plaint of Nature*, trans. James J. Sheridan (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1980), 67. This focus, although occasionally returned to, becomes almost immediately tied to and secondary to aesthetic concerns.

⁴³ James Sheridan writes that Alain’s labyrinthine sentence structure is often so “tortured” that “one is reminded of some of Joyce’s English.” “Introduction,” *The Plaint of Nature*, 33. The “labyrinthine” nature of Alain’s syntax, observed by Sheridan, is also relevant: it is a structural, formal manifestation of the labyrinth, the architectural embodiment of wandering. There is a connection between Alain’s syntax and Chaucer’s House of Rumor, an image of speech and writing that he explicitly ties to the labyrinth.

world].⁴⁴ The text dwells on her physical description, in meticulous detail, down to the perfect width of her eyebrows and the perfect fit of her shoes. The passage narrating Alain's dreamer's experience of seeing her, included here, is especially revealing.

Although the ornaments of these garments are on fire with the full glow of their splendour, their brilliance suffered eclipse by comparison with the star-like beauty of the maiden. With the aid of a reed-pen, the maiden called up various images by drawing on slate tablets. The picture, however, did not cling closely to the underlying material but, quickly fading and disappearing, left no trace of the impression behind. Although the maiden, by repeatedly calling these up, gave them a continuity of existence, yet the images in her projected picture failed to endure. [...] When I was concentrating my rays of vision or, if I may say so, the troops of my eyes, to explore the glory of this beauty, my eyes, not daring to confront the splendour of such majesty and dulled by the impact of brilliance, in excessive fear, took refuge in the war-tents of my eyelids. (Alain 108-9)⁴⁵

This is a complex portrait of beauty, but each of its aspects seems to be intentional, as they are further explored in the remainder of the *De planctu*. It involves, first of all, beauty as *resplendence*—her clothes are “on fire with the full glow of their splendor,” her beauty is “star-like,” and she reflects and amplifies the dreamer’s “rays of vision”—and in this it bears resemblance to the Scholastic definition of beauty. This image, however, is specifically *resplendence in motion*, and after this the portrait becomes truly

⁴⁴ All references to the Latin text of *De planctu naturae* are from Alanus, *Liber de planctu naturae*, in *The Anglo-Latin Satirical Poets and Epigrammatists of the Twelfth Century*, ed. Thomas Wright (London: Rolls, 1872). The English translation is James Sheridan's: Alain de Lille, *The Complaint of Nature*, 73.

⁴⁵ *The Complaint of Nature*, 108-09. “*Haec vestium ornamenta, quamvis plenis suae splendoris flammarent ardoribus eorundem tamen splendor sub puellaris decoris sidere patiebatur eclipsim. In lateritiis vero tabulis, arundinei styli ministerio, virgo varias rerum picturaliter suscitabat imagines. Pictura tamen subjacenti materiae familiariter non cohaerens, velociter evanescendo moriens, nulla imaginum post se relinquebat vestigia. Quas cum saepe suscitando puella crebro vivere faciebat, tamen in scripturae proposito imagines perseverare non poterant. [...] Ad cujus contemplandam pulchritudinis dignitatem, dum tanquam manipulos oculorum radios conligare visibiles, ipsi tantae non audentes majestatis obviare decori, splendoris hebetati verberibus nimis meticulosi ad palpebrarum contubernia refugiunt.*” Alanus, *Liber de planctu naturae*, 444-45.

extraordinary, depicting superlative beauty as terrifying, explosive, fragmentary, and mobile.

Alain's dreamer's response to her overwhelming beauty is "*nimis meticulosus*" [excessive fear]. The arrival of her splendor at his eyes is described in military terms, his sight as a fleeing army. Previously the focus of the text, the dreamer is now profoundly decentered and terrified, yet unable to look away.⁴⁶ Later in the work, his experience is described as "*exstasis*," a rich term clearly related to the English "ecstasy," but also related to "terror" and an experience outside of oneself. Fragmentation, or a certain level of disorder, is also communicated in her appearance as the perfect harmony of her garments serves to accentuate, by contrast, a tear running through and dividing them—one of the poem's primary subjects of lament.

The constant motion of her depiction is apparent from her first appearance: she is "gliding" down and "*ad [...] maturare*" [hastening her steps] in the dreamer's direction.⁴⁷ More notably, even those aspects of her appearance that would be expected to be still—such as the images on her clothing—are moving. All of the creatures of the land and fish of the sea are swimming and wandering across her garments in moving images, and the first detail of the dress mentioned is its color—in continual, kaleidoscopic motion:

"changing circumstances, which substituted one hue for another, altered the garment with

⁴⁶ Elaine Scarry, for example, describes this decentering experience of beauty and argues for its modern relevance and its appearance in literature as ancient as Virgil. She writes: "At the moment we see something beautiful, we undergo a radical decentering. [...] It is as though one has ceased to be the hero or heroine of one's own story and has become what in folktale is called the 'lateral figure' or 'donor figure.'" Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), 111-13. Adorno, similarly, describes the experience of beauty as the disappearance of the self. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 14.

⁴⁷ Alanus, *Liber de planctu naturae*, 431. Alain, *The Plaint of Nature*, 73.

a varied display of colour.”⁴⁸ The lengthy passage quoted above also includes a fascinating medieval description of animation: she is constantly drawing on tablets she holds with her *stylus*, but the images are fleeting, hovering for a moment in time but disappearing as she continues to draw. Nature’s depiction is a blend of constant motion and momentary suspension, including motion where stasis is expected, revealing a writer who was uniquely experimenting with time and space.

This aesthetic portrait—which layers the highest beauty with constant motion, the suspended instant, and the experience of fear and wonder—bears many of the hallmarks of twelfth-century aesthetics, but may also surprisingly remind twenty-first-century readers of certain postmodern definitions of beauty in motion. Theodor Adorno in *Aesthetic Theory*, for example, defines beauty as that which causes the most profound “shudder,” and the painful, wonderful experience of the vanishing of the self, a phenomenon “profoundly akin to an explosion,” characterized by movement and the dramatic suspension of ephemeral images.⁴⁹ It is fitting, considering the similarities between the representations of movement as it relates to aesthetics in these diverse works, that Chaucer would choose an explosion to express his eagle’s arrival in *The House of Fame*. Like Alain’s dreamer’s experience of Nature, the arrival of the eagle is a spectacle, a phenomenon of vision. It is also intensely aesthetic—one of the few moments in Chaucer’s poem identified as “beautiful.” The images in the Temple of Glass were

⁴⁸ Ibid., 437-43 and 85-104.

⁴⁹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 12, 13, 84. Adorno’s memorable image of the drama of the “suspended instant” is his analogy to the edges of clouds in a thunderstorm: “it is spectacle in the way that clouds present Shakespearian dramas, or the way the illuminated edges of clouds seem to give duration to lightning flashes. While art does not reproduce those clouds, dramas nonetheless attempt to enact the dramas staged by clouds.” Ibid., 71.

described as shining and impressive, but in this moment the poem provides a glimpse of the *experience* of wonder and beauty, and this experience takes place in motion.

The “flight through space” and the whirling House of Rumor in *The House of Fame* may be the two most potent images of motion in Chaucer’s entire body of poetry. The latter is more frequently discussed by critics, especially in regard to the development of vernacular literature, but the flight is equally deserving of attention. It is unusual in its overt theorization of movement—in the words of the eagle—even as it enacts and narrates swift motion. It is, in part, a lecture on motion and in motion, but it is also much more than this. The eagle’s first action can be understood as tearing Geoffrey out of the reflective mode and into the immediate experience of his physical surroundings. As he is lifted into the air, the dreamer’s mind does exactly what we should expect from the beginning of the poem and from the long narrative aside in the Temple of Glass: he compares his present situation to the past stories of Enoch, Elijah, Romulus, and Ganymede, and worries in stilted language that Jove will “stellyfye” him, or turn him into a star (586-89). The eagle, a wry character, pulls him out of this literary reverie with a few short words: “Jove is not theraboute.”⁵⁰ His criticism of Geoffrey following these words relates to exactly this issue: your writing has suffered, he proclaims, because you don’t hear and experience what’s going on around you, even among your next-door neighbors, because when you go home you “sittest at another book / Tyl fully daswed ys

⁵⁰ Howard observes the humor of this section, in contrast to the Dantean eagle of the *Commedia*: “the eagle is *funny*, a smug pedant and a compulsive talker.” Donald R. Howard, “Flying Through Space: Chaucer and Milton,” in *Milton and the Line of Vision*, ed. Joseph Anthony Jr. Wittreich (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1975), 5.

thy look” (657-58).⁵¹ The impetus for this flight is based on Geoffrey’s need—as perceived by the eagle—to stop living the life of a hermit, to get out, to move, to experience energy and new things, to receive news of people’s lives, and the “Hous of Rumor” is the place that is supposed to provide this experience. In short, he has “gone stale,” static, and the trajectory of the narrative expresses that the kind of experience the Temple of Glass provided is not the remedy for this stasis; he will not find inspiration in a hall of immobile pictures of old stories, but in what turns out to be a place of whirling, constant motion, deafening noise, and the words spoken by everybody in the world at the present moment. The Temple of Glass is the physical manifestation of the old books that the dreamer reads ceaselessly in waking life, and the imaginative context of the dream allows for the appearance of an eagle to come down like a bolt of lightning to dramatically rip him away from them. In the dream, this very physical movement mirrors the mental movement it is supposed to spark in the waking life of Geoffrey, the dreamer and writer.

⁵¹ That is, that thou hast no tydynges
Of Loves folk yf they be glade,
Ne of nought elles that God made;
And noght oonly fro fer contree
That ther no tydyng cometh to thee,
But of thy verray neyghebores,
That duellen almost at thy dores,
Thou herest neyther that ne this;
For when thy labour doon al ys,
And hast mad alle thy rekenynges,
In stede of reste and newe thynges
Thou goest hom to thy hous anoon,
And, also domb as any stoon,
Thou sittest at another book
Tyl fully daswed ys thy look;
And lyvest thus as an heremyte.
(644-59)

The remainder of the flight through space is an exciting manifestation of movement in poetry. The eagle plays a game of distance with the dreamer, the object of which is to guess how far below things are; the dreamer sees the earth, tiny, underneath him; and the eagle asks Geoffrey to turn his eyes still further upward, dizzyingly, to “behold this large space, / This eyr” where he sees the terrifying “eyryssh bestes,” which defy description (925-26, 932). Geoffrey narrates:

Tho gan y loken under me
And beheld the ayerissh bestes,
Cloudes, mystes, and tempestes,
Snowes, hayles, reynes, wyndes,
And th’engendrynge in hir kyndes,
All the wey through which I cam.
(964-69)

In what is almost a literalization of Ockham’s depiction of projectile motion through the air, “diverse moving things are there.” In sharp contrast to the static, painted tempest on the wall of the House of Glass, these things are, despite being in a dream, experienced in swift movement as physically present. Even in view of the “Galaxie” itself, however, Chaucer’s poetry retains an earthy connection to fourteenth-century English places of travel, noting that “(somme, parfey, / Kallen hyt Watlynge Strete),” playfully layering this sublime vision with a road in his familiar London (938-39).

The movement described above corresponds to Ockham’s primary category of motion: *motu localis*. As is explored below in terms of architectural and sonic movement, Aristotle’s and Ockham’s theories enter the poem explicitly as the dreamer progresses on his flight. Up to this point, however, the process of being set in motion and the resistance to stasis is the dominant progression of the narrative. Ockham emphasized that it is

natural for a thing to move, violent for it to stop, and the denial of stasis found in *The House of Fame*, the “beauty and wonder” that is described as existing in movement, and the eagle’s direct call to a life of mobility are all consistent with Ockham’s fourteenth-century vision of a mobile physical universe.

Chaucer’s related depiction of motion found in this poem, furthermore, is carried on and developed in his later dream poem, *The Parliament of the Fowls*. The physical movements of this poem are not only those enacted by the dreamer—although the majority fall into this category—but are also present in other layers of the dream and “reality.” Although the poem begins, as it ends, in the conspicuous stasis of reading “a bok, [that] was write with lettres olde [...] the longe day,” we soon begin to experience motion within the story itself (19-21). Scipio the Elder carries Scipio the Younger on a flight upward through space—reminiscent of the dreamer’s trajectory in the eagle’s claws in the *House of Fame*—to “a sterry place,” where he shows him “the lytel erthe,” “the Galaxye,” and the “nyne speres,” full of “melodye” and “armonye” (43-63). As readers, alongside Scipio, we are shown a starry space of slow, circular, harmonious movements as we hover among the wheeling planets; this situation is strikingly reminiscent of Aristotle’s *motu caelesti* [heavenly movement]—the eternal, orderly balance between time and space. If one works toward the “commune profit,” Scipio teaches, then one’s soul will join with the harmonious movement of the spheres; those who are “likerous,” or break the law, however, “shul whirle aboute th’erthe alwey in peyne, / Tyl many a world be passed” (75-80). Although motion “aboute th’erthe” may refer to either movement on the earth’s surface or around the globe, it is clear that Scipio presents the afterlife as two

alternative types of constant motion: the one in harmony and order, the other frantic and chaotic, “whirling” like the twig-built labyrinth of the House of Rumor.

In addition to harmonious and frenetic motion, a third possibility is introduced when the day ends and the narrator, with no more light by which to read, falls asleep and enters the dream. This is *immobility*, which becomes the greatest challenge to overcome in the course of the dreamer’s journey. The condition of stasis is subtly predicted in the opening stanza of the poem, where Love is characterized as a force with the power to “astonyeth”: to astonish, to shock, to turn to stone. Confronted with the gate—again, a structure of apparent significance to Chaucer and the site of his daily existence while writing—in the garden wall of green rock at the threshold of Venus’ garden, the dreamer is metaphorically turned to iron:

No wit hadde I, for errour, for to chese
To entre or flen, or me to save or lese.

Right as betwixen adamauntes two
Of evene myght, a pece of yren set
Ne hath no myght to meve to ne fro—
For what oon may hale, that other let—
Ferde I.

(146-52)

The dreamer compares his inability to decide to enter or “flee” to the experience of a piece of iron placed evenly between two adamants—or magnetic stones. This image is particularly relevant because magnetic forces were frequently the subject of theories of physics in the Middle Ages, prominently including the writings of Ockham; it also communicates a sense not of the end of motion, but of motion suspended. Even the stanza break between lines 147 and 148 serves to emphasize the uncomfortable momentary

stasis of the dreamer's situation, causing a moment of hesitation in the poetic rhythm in which to consider his immobility and ambivalence. Fortunately, although he will be required to provide his own impetus later in the dream, at this point he has the help of his guide to shove him out of this impossible situation. Like the balance between two perfectly even magnetic forces, this moment of suspension is unsustainable in the narrative, and Scipio literally *shoves* (shof) the dreamer out of stasis and through the gates, revealing that jarring, sudden, violent movement is the remedy for the danger of stasis in this case (154). That this position of immobility is a problem is not only implied by the narrative, but explicitly stated by Scipio, who names it "errour" (156). This moment in the poem marks a change; from here until the end the vision has left behind harmonious movement and immobility in favor of something new: a kind of movement that embodies the complexity that Ockham amplifies in his theorization of motion. This is also the moment where Chaucer hits his poetic stride, and the subsequent lines are famous for their vitality. Chaucer's poetry at this point begins to overflow with variety, including an expansive natural vocabulary of English trees and birds, his language becomes more playful—as evidenced in the onomatopoetic lines of the parliament, discussed below—and his rhythm becomes increasingly dactylic.⁵² In this way, Chaucer artistically upholds the principle that it is natural for things to remain in motion.

⁵² Images of vitality, dactylic meter, and examples of an expansive natural vocabulary are frequent at this point. For example:

For overal where that I myne eyen caste
Were trees clad with leves that ay shal laste,
Ech in his kynde, of colour fresh and greene
As emeraude, that joye was to seene.
The byldere ok, and ek the hardy asshe;

Venus's Temple, in the heart of the idyllic garden—a space that is painstakingly described, including a long, rhythmic list of trees—presents the dreamer with another challenge in the form of immobility, in direct parallel to the Temple of Glass in *The House of Fame*. Here, we do not see the narrator explicitly describe his hesitation, but the long, lingering description of his surroundings, coupled with what he sees there, communicates a kind of stasis. Venus's temple clearly makes him uncomfortable—ambivalent again, he does and does not want to look at what, and who, is inside. This is, of course, a place of sexual desire: his entry into the temple is greeted with “sykes hoot as fyr [...] Whiche sikkes were engendered with desyr” (246-47). Stories of love are painted on the walls, the phallic god Priapus is standing “with hys scepter in hond,” and Venus is in a “prive corner in disport” with “hire porter, Richesse”—images of frozen sexual motion (253-61). Again, the narrative passes over the Temple of Venus, however, in favor of a different kind of space and a different kind of beauty. The importance of this episode seems to be, at least in part, in the seduction of *staying* in that place, and the fact that the dreamer must overcome this desire. He does so through a simple action: he goes for a walk. This time his departure is quiet, but it is clearly a choice to keep moving rather than to remain: “whan I was come ayeyn into the place / That I of spak, that was so sote and grene, / Forth welk I tho myselfen to solace” (295-97). This choice of continuing motion through the dream is enough to shift the narrative to a new and more

The piler elm, the cofre unto carayne;
 The boxtre pipere, holm to whippes lashe;
 The saylynge fyr; the cipresse, deth to playne;
 The shetere ew; the asp for shaftes pleyne;
 The olive of pes, and eke the dronke vyne;
 The victor palm, the laurer to devyne.
 (173-82)

vibrant form of aesthetic spectacle. The line immediately after this choice to take a walk to clear his head narrates the appearance of the personage who is positioned as the alternative form of beauty to Venus (in bed) and the stagnant air of her temple: the “noble goddesse Nature,” “in a launde, upon an hil of floures” (302-3):

Tho was I war where that ther sat a queene
That, as of light the somer sonne shene
Passeth the sterre, right so over mesure
She fayrer was than any creature.
(298-301)

Here, rather than describing Nature in his own words, Chaucer chooses instead to refer to Alain de Lille’s depiction: “and right as Aleyn, in the Pleynt of Kynde, / Devyseth Nature of aray and face, / In swich aray men myghte hire there fynde” (316-18). As is the case with the arrival of Nature in Alain’s poem and of the eagle in *The House of Fame*, Nature’s appearance marks the poem’s return to motion, and the renewed vitality and freshness is palpable.

This narrative motion brings the dreamer to the title event: the mobile climax of the poem, characterized by two registers of motion. The first is the most basic: the birds themselves are moving, entering and filling space, flying to the place of the parliament and flying away. Furthermore, their movement is constant, multi-directional, and disjunctive, far more like Ockham’s depiction of movement—diverse in direction and impetus—than Aristotle’s. Even the relative order of the parliament is confining to them, especially when it drags on and interferes with their desire to break away from the institutional process and quickly escape with their new mates—“Have don, and lat us wende!” (492). The second form of motion, central to the end of this poem, is noise.

“SOUN IS NOGHT BUT EYR YBROKEN”:⁵³ SOUND AS MOTION

In *The House of Fame*, Chaucer, via Aristotle and possibly Ockham, establishes that sound is intimately related to movement, and is in fact a kind of motion. The key to an important aspect of the eagle’s, and this poem’s, theorization of movement is the eagle’s lecture on “kyndely enclynyng,” which Donald Howard has called “the medieval equivalent of the law of gravity”:⁵⁴

‘Geffrey, thou wost right wel this,
That every kyndely thing that is
Hath a kyndely stede ther he
May best in hyt conserved be;
Unto which place every thing
Thorgh his kyndely enclynyng
Moveth for to come to
Whan that hyt is away therfro;
As thus: loo, thou maist alday se
That any thing that hevy be,
As stone, or led, or thyng of wighte,
And bere hyt never so hye on highte,
Lat goo thyn hand, hit falleth down.
Ryght so seye I be fyr or soun,
Or smoke or other thynges lyghte;
Alwey they seke upward on highte.’
(729-44)

This fascinating, pre-Newtonian theory of natural movement relies on the natural motions of heavy and light objects, which are frequent subjects in the works of Ockham, who categorizes them as “*levia*” and “*gravia*.” The eagle’s theory doesn’t end there, of course, but further proposes, specifically citing Plato and Aristotle, that “spech is soun” [speech is sound], that “soun is noght but eyr ybroken” [sound is broken air], that it therefore

⁵³ Line 762.

⁵⁴ Howard, “Flying Through Space: Chaucer and Milton,” 5.

desires to travel upward in rings through the air like a pond into which a stone has been thrown, and that it is therefore possible for all sounds in the world to eventually reach a single place: the House of Fame (762, 765, 785-821). The key to this theory is that every sound “moveth first an ayr aboute, / And of thys movynge, out of doute, / Another ayr anon ys meved,” mirroring Ockham’s words about projectile motion: “and therefore one part moved with a natural motion pushes the other, and if the other succeeds, because of that the other is moved violently, which moved it moves the other either to its proper place more quickly than it is moved by itself, or to another place” (811-13).⁵⁵ Speech, this section argues, is motion.

The eagle’s words, then, as he and the dreamer fly through the upper airs, explicitly make the connection between language and movement. Although many of Chaucer’s critics have grasped the relationship between this poem’s dynamism and Chaucer’s vision for English vernacular poetry, they have underemphasized the extent to which this section constitutes a theorization of movement itself. This speech forms, furthermore, a *learned* theorization that shows familiarity with Aristotle (either from Aristotle’s *Physics*, *De caelo*, which had been translated during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries from the Greek and Arabic, or from Ockham’s commentaries), Ockham, or both, since they extensively theorize the natural motion that Chaucer calls “kyndely enclynyng.”⁵⁶ Considering the context of this expression of the theory within the rest of Chaucer’s poem, it seems likely that Chaucer was familiar with Ockham’s physical

⁵⁵ Ockham, *Expositio in libros physicorum aristotelis*, 626.

⁵⁶ Sheila Delany, *Chaucer’s House of Fame: The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994), 72.

works because of the resemblance between both authors' depiction of the multitude of "diverse moving things" that influence and embody movement. Chaucer, at very least, came to similar conclusions drawn in part from a philosophical context in which Ockham was a shaping force. Furthermore, the interlacing of these theories into Chaucer's poem demonstrates a clear interest in the physical workings of motion.

Chaucer introduces a new element to "kyndely enclyning": the trajectory of the eagle's argument toward speech *as* motion. Chaucer, here, is going further than expressing a mobile literary aesthetic, although that is an important part of what he is doing; he is also saying that his poems, including *The House of Fame*, as they are read aloud literally *become* movement, moving the air in concentric rings until they reach the ears of the audience. Nowhere else in Chaucer's poetry is writing so clearly intertwined—here, even conflated—with motion. This is not an isolated idea, however, but one that continues to be expressed and explored, in subtler ways, in the remainder of this poem and his later works. Chaucer does not end this section as a treatise on physics, however, but instead puts his characteristically playful twist on it in a line that could mistakenly be understood as merely present for the rhyme: "take yt in ernest or in game" (822). The entire trip to the House of Fame is framed by the eagle as a kind of game for Geoffrey's enjoyment, and this line helps us to understand that Chaucer is not merely theorizing, but exploring physics and language. In doing so, he has expressed—in his conflation of the words as movement—an idea that will continue to be important to his entire body of works.

Although one of the most climactic moments of *The Parliament of the Fowls* is the dreamer's immobility before the gate and Scipio's shove through it, the accepted climax of the poem, the parliament itself, is also notable in terms of motion. This movement is manifest in the two registers mentioned earlier: the earthy, chaotic, frantic but delightful movements and noises of the birds. As the fowls of every kind arrive to choose their mates on "Seynt Valentynes day,"

So huge a noyse gan they make
That erthe, and eyr, and tre, and every lake
So ful was that unethe was there space
For me to stond, so ful was al the place.
(312-15)

Later in the parliament, when the majority of the birds are frustrated by the slow and overly-ceremonial wooing of the eagles, deafening noise erupts again: "the noyse of foules for to ben delivered / So loude rong, 'Have don, and lat us wende!' / That wel wende I the wode hadde al to-shyvered" (491-93). This noise is expressed—with an earthy tangibility so characteristic of this part of the poem—in some of the first lines of onomatopoeia in English poetry: "kek kek! Kokkow! Quek quek!" (498). Even as the birds fly away after their song, their winged departure causes a "shoutyng" so great that it wakes the narrator and forces him out of the dream (693).

In *The House of Fame*, he has already expressed in the eagle's words that sound is nothing but broken air, ceaselessly moving outward in rings like the ripples on a pond after a stone is thrown into it and upwards through space.⁵⁷ According to the

⁵⁷ 'Be experience, for yf that thou
Throwe on water now a stoon,
Wel wost thou hyt wol make anoon
A litel roundel as a sercle,

understanding of physics expressed in Chaucer's poetry, then, the noise of the birds is a kind of movement in itself, and the multi-voiced, deafening roar they create together embodies the kind of movement Chaucer seems to favor in his poetry: one that resembles the diversity of forces that Ockham describes. This definition of sound as the movement of air is expressed subtly in this poem as well, in the narrator's observation "that wel wende I the wode hadde al to-shyvered"—that the noise was such that he believed that the forest itself was shattering (493). The explosive quality of movement, worlds away from the harmonious orbit of the Dream of Scipio at the beginning of the poem, becomes the climax of the work.

Paraunter brod as a covercle;
And right anon thow shalt see wel
That whel wol cause another whel,
And that the thridde, and so forth, brother,
Every sercle causynge other
Wydder than hymseve was;
And thus fro roundel to compass,
Ech aboute other goynge
Causeth of others sterynge
And multiplying ever moo,
Til hyt at bothe brynkes bee.
Although thou mowe hyt not ysee
Above, hyt gooth yet always under,
Although thou thence hyt a gret wonder.
And whoseo seyth of trouthe I varye,
Bid hym proven the contrarye.
And right thus every word, ywys,
That lowd or pryvee spoken ys,
Moveth first an ayr aboute,
And of thys movynge, out of doute,
Another ayr anon ys meved;
As I have of the water preved,
That every cercle causeth other,
Ryght so of ayr, my leve brother:
Everych ayr another stereth
More and more, and speche up bereth,
Or voys, or noyse, or word, or soun,
Ay through multiplicacioun,
Til hit be ate Hous of Fame—
Tak yt in ernest or in game.'
(788-822)

**“AND EVER MO, AS SWYFT AS THOUGHT, / THIS QUEYNTE HOUS ABOUTE WENTE”:⁵⁸
CHAUCER’S KINETIC ARCHITECTURE**

The trajectory of *The House of Fame* brings the dreamer, carried by his eagle guide, to the labyrinthine structure that gives the poem its name “right even in myddes of the weye / Betwixen hevene and erthe and see,” a crossroads in space, where the conflation of language and movement, already theorized, is depicted as a physical place (714-15). This third and final book of the poem, introduced through an invocation to Apollo, “god of science and lyght,” is characterized by truly chaotic movement.⁵⁹ The eagle having departed (although he will return), the dreamer is forced to climb “with alle payne” up a sheer cliff-face of ice (1118). Images of thunder and tempest return to Chaucer’s poetic line as Geoffrey approaches the House: its mighty sound is “lyk betynge of the see [...] ayen the roches holowe, / Whan tempest doth the shippes swalowe,” or “lyk the last humblynge / After the clappe of a thundringe” (1034-36, 1039-40). As in *The Parliament of the Fowls*, the climactic spectacle is characterized by deafening noise, which, as this poem has taken great pains to inform us, is to be understood as spatial motion—physical movement, even breaking, of the air. The scene inside the House is everything that the Temple of Glass was not: swarms of people coming and going, every kind of entertainer imaginable in late medieval English society performing, the great horn

⁵⁸ Lines 1924-25.

⁵⁹ The mention of “science” in this invocation is interesting and appropriate, especially considering the eagle’s lecture on physics and its manifestation in the House of Rumor. This scientific thread—science here meaning more than simply “knowledge” and taking on its more modern associations—continues in the surprising description of strange inventions in the House of Fame, including “a wynd-melle / Under a walsh-note shale” [a windmill under a walnut shell] (1091, 1280-81). This passage lends itself to a reading that appreciates the link between literary motion and the sciences, an idea that Angus Fletcher supports in *Time, Space, and Motion in the Age of Shakespeare*.

blowing either good or bad fame across the face of the earth. But the most stunning image of motion in this poem is the source of the noise originally heard—the House positioned in a valley under the castle,

that Domus Dedaly,
That Laboryntus cleped ys,
Nas mad so wonderlych, ywis,
Ne half so queyntelych ywrought.
(1920-23)

The multiple layers of images of movement embodied in this place unroll as it is described. The first is the initial comparison used to describe it: it is like the Labyrinth, or “Domus Dedaly.” The labyrinth, as a structure, is built for movement alone; its twists, turns, corners, and dead ends exist to facilitate unpredictable, wandering, and confused movement. It is the physical embodiment, or a kind of physical mapping or writing on the land “in a scrawling hand,” as Henri Lefebvre might note, of a kind of intensely irregular motion.⁶⁰ Donald Howard, in relation to this image in Chaucer’s poem, reminds us that the *domus Dedali* was a kind of design painted on or carved into medieval church walls and floors in the shape of a labyrinth, used for penance. Those seeking to do penance for their sins would either trace the path of their movement through the labyrinth with their fingers or crawl upon the image on the floor as a substitute for pilgrimage.⁶¹ The *domus*

⁶⁰ “Traversed now by pathways and patterned by networks, natural space changes: one might say that practical activity writes upon nature, albeit in a scrawling hand, and that this writing implies a particular representation of space. Places are marked, noted, named. [...] Paths are more important than the traffic they bear, because they are what endures in the form of the reticular patterns [...] Could it be called a text, or a message?” Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 117.

⁶¹ Howard, “Flying through Space: Chaucer and Milton,” 13-14. Howard also refers to John Leyerle’s argument that this passage is the “germ” of *The Canterbury Tales* because the *domus Daedali* symbolized a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, “the true destination of the Canterbury pilgrimage according to the Parson in his prologue,” thus basing the *Tales* in this image of movement from *The House of Fame*. John Leyerle, “Chaucer’s Windy Eagle,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 40 (1971).

Dedali, then, can be understood as a static image that also embodies and facilitates movement, literally and insofar as it figures travel abroad. All of this fascinating experimentation with physical objects and structures that embody movement is present from the first mention of this house of twigs.

The motion of this place, however, is also far more obviously literal than the roaring of its noise and its association with the labyrinth: “and ever mo, as swyft as thought, / This queynte hous aboute wente, / That never mo hyt stille stente” (1924-26). This massive building, referred to as “the Whirling Whicker” by Pierro Boitani, perpetually spins in place.⁶² Like Nature’s kaleidoscopic, ever-changing dress and the continual drawing of ephemeral images in Alain’s *De planctu naturae*, the description of this place embodies pluralism and complex motion. In terms of its construction, while the walls in the Temple of Glass were starkly polished and ordered, this “house” is like an enormous nest—perhaps foreshadowing the later parliament of the birds and their form of movement, and certainly an image of seemingly disordered construction through a natural, earthy, and random process. To augment this image of plurality, the twigs of which it is built are wildly multicolored—“and al thys hous of which y rede, / Was mad of twigges, falwe, rede, / And grene eke, and somme weren white” (1935-37). Doorways, of course, are controllers of movement through an architectural space—as Chaucer, living over one of the “principle” gates of London, would have been more aware than most—and this place seems to be constructed more of doorways than of walls (1945-46).

⁶² Piero Boitani, “Chaucer’s Labyrinth: Fourteenth-Century Literature and Language,” *Chaucer Review* 17, no. 3 (1983).

This multitude of doors defines it as a space of multi-directional and chaotic movement, in opposition to the one or two doors of the Temple of Glass, even without the constant spinning motion of the entire structure. Finally, the crowd of people inside are also those characterized by their travel over land and sea: “shipmen and pilgrims” (2122).

Generations of Chaucer scholars have recognized the links between this house of twigs and Chaucer’s ideas about poetry, especially in relation to issues of poetic authority, form, the vernacular, and the eventual creation of the *Canterbury Tales*.⁶³ This place embodies, in dramatic contrast to the Temple of Glass and its static images of classical stories, a shift from the authority of classical sources to that of the words of the present moment, and words spoken by *all* people, a profoundly important move in relation to his later poetry and the development of English vernacular literature. Paul Strohm describes Chaucer’s texts as “places crowded with many voices representing many centers of social authority.”⁶⁴ John Ganim, who, in *Chaucerian Theatricality*,

⁶³ Steven Kruger, one of many such examples, writes: “As has been widely recognized, the *House of Fame* forcefully and explicitly calls attention to its own poetic status,” and that “it also examines the processes of transmission and transformation by which authoritative traditions may be questioned and finished poems themselves unmade and reinvented.” Steven F. Kruger, “Imagination and the Complex Movement of Chaucer’s House of Fame,” *The Chaucer Review* 28, no. 2 (1993): 118. Other studies that call attention to *The House of Fame*, not only as a poem about poetry but about authority and poetic transmission include: Robert J. Allen, “A Recurring Motif in Chaucer’s ‘House of Fame,’” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 55, no. 3 (1956); Robert O. Payne, *The Key of Remembrance, a Study of Chaucer’s Poetics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963); J. A. W. Bennett, *Chaucer’s ‘Book of Fame’: An Exposition of ‘the House of Fame,’* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968); P. M. Kean, *Chaucer and the Making of English Poetry* (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1972); Jorg O. Fichte, *Chaucer’s ‘Art Poetical’: A Study in Chaucerian Poetics* (Tübingen, Germany: Narr Tübingen, 1980); Karla Taylor, *Chaucer Reads “The Divine Comedy”* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1989); Martin Irvine, “Medieval Grammatical Theory and Chaucer’s *House of Fame*,” *Speculum* 60 (1985); Delany, *Chaucer’s House of Fame: The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism*; Jacqueline T. Miller, “The Writing on the Wall: Authority and Authorship in Chaucer’s House of Fame,” *The Chaucer Review* 17, no. 2 (1982); Katherine Zieman, “Chaucer’s Voys,” *Representations* 60 (1997). William S. Wilson, “Scholastic Logic in Chaucer’s House of Fame,” *The Chaucer Review* 1, no. 3 (1967).

⁶⁴ Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989).

understands Chaucer's writing in the context of performance and gesture—an idea to which this study of Chaucer's dream visions as poems of movement is indebted—argues that the “oral fiction” of the *Canterbury Tales* is overheard conversation.⁶⁵

The words of all people in the world, as the eagle has told us, are formed of physically moving air rippling toward this place, arriving in spoken fragments as a cacophony of sound, which is favored in the narrative over order. Not only does the house of twigs embody a shift toward the vernacular and the authority of the language of the present moment, but Chaucer chooses to express this shift in terms of motion—from stasis to constant, pluralistic, fragmentary movement. This place, in its movement and even in the narrator's emphasis upon the travelers inside, suggests that Chaucer's vision for English vernacular poetry may not have only included the poetic expression of people's conversations, but an attention to and expression of their movements, considering the prominence of local motion—*motu localis*—in the narrative. As we continue to see in Chaucer's later works, he seems preoccupied with travel, the paths over which people move, their daily motions, and, of course, the conversations they have and the stories they tell that relate to and take place in motion. Perhaps Chaucer understood something analogous to what Lefebvre expressed in the twentieth century—not only the fact that people's travels create a communicative script, but also what he expressed in his late work *rhythmanalysis*: that listening to the rhythms of people's movements, quotidian

⁶⁵ “The oral fiction of *The Canterbury Tales* is not that it is heard, but that it is overheard. Part of the “overheard” quality of the work is also implicit in its dependence on forms of village communication such as gossip, or in Chaucer's conscious play with the possible disparity between a public culturally and socially prepared for the interpretation of a particular text and an audience without that context or with a totally different one.” Ganim, *Chaucerian Theatricality*, 21.

and extraordinary, can help one to understand profound ideas about a culture, and grasp the significance and beauty of those movements.

The end of *The House of Fame*, including the fact that it is unfinished, a source of frequent debate—was it abandoned or left intentionally incomplete?—continues to embody the kind of motion described above, especially in its chaotic form. If the trajectory of this poem is from stasis to chaotic movement, as I have argued, and if this trajectory is central to its communicative power, then the following lines at the end of the poem could hardly be more appropriate:

I herde a gret noyse withalle
In a corner of the halle,
Ther men of love-tydynges tolde,
And I gan thiderward beholde;
For I saugh rennyng every wight
As faste as that they hadden myght,
And everych cried, ‘What thing is that?’
And somme sayde, ‘I not never what.’
And whan they were alle on an hepe,
Tho behynde begunne lepe,
And clamben up on other faste,
And up the nose and yën kaste,
And trodden fast on others heles,
And stampen, as men doon aftir eles.
(2141-54)

After this, of course, the final four lines narrate the appearance of the mysterious “man of gret auctorite,” but the purpose of this chapter does not include the interesting debate about the nature of this character, and so it will avoid the question that many have taken on, and only express a tendency to agree with those who see the abrupt end of the poem

at this point as an expression of the poem's resistance to singular authority.⁶⁶ What is perhaps most important to note here is the poem's "degeneration" into shouting, confusion, stomping (as one does when trying to catch eels), stepping on feet, piling into a heap, and running madly in every direction. Read in the light of this understanding of *The House of Fame* as a poetic exploration of movements, favoring a particular kind of motion, this scene is not a degeneration at all. Instead, whether it was meant to be "finished" or not, this end is a poetic expression of the humorous chaos that this kind of aesthetic model entails in Chaucer's hands. If the poem was intentionally unfinished, it seems likely that cutting it off here was intended to avoid the sense of singular finality and rest that an ending would provide in favor of unfinished, continued motion. Rather than a hypothetical ending, which, if it held true to generic conventions, may have involved an explanatory figure and the return of the dreamer to the stasis of his bedroom, we have been provided with the gift of a poem that expresses, in its final image, a scene of frenetic movement that no "man," however, "gret" his "auctoritee," will ever contain.

CODA: *THE CANTERBURY TALES*

This chapter began with an image drawn from records of medieval London and Chaucer's life: a gate, defined by constant building and rebuilding, pieced together out of materials from all over Europe, defined by the people who have passed through and transformed it, and an author living above this gate and its constant yet irregular traffic of people, animals, and objects. I would like to end with another image, this one drawn from

⁶⁶ Delany, *Chaucer's House of Fame: The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism*. Boitani, "Chaucer's Labyrinth: Fourteenth-Century Literature and Language."

literature: the physical path traced by *The Canterbury Tales*. It is, first, a physical road mirroring the one written on the land by historical pilgrims to Canterbury, written again in the few sparse references to travel between tales, and through the constant awareness that each tale is told while in physical motion. If the order of the Ellesmere Manuscript is accepted, then this road has a beginning and end—or at least it seems to.⁶⁷ The Tabard Inn, although rooted in a physical place, or *locus* (historically as well as literarily), is nonetheless defined by *motu ad ubi* and transition. It is a roadside inn, placed at neither the beginning nor the end of a road, but placed for those in transit. Those who enter this space of motion, so vividly described, are famously characterized by their diversity, dynamism, and plurality. The “end” of the road depicted in the *Tales* appears in the Parson’s Prologue, where Chaucer-as-narrator breaks his silence about spatial setting to inform us that the sun is very low in the sky and that the pilgrims are “entryng at a thropes ende” (12). They are approaching a town, a fact that, combined with the setting sun, calls attention to spatial movement but also to a coming rest. This town is, however, not Canterbury, and we know from this, as well as from the lack of so many of the promised tales and decision of a winner, that the tale-telling group will continue to move. Intentional or unintentional, the fragmentary nature and lack of closure to the *Tales* are crucial to its embodiment of the aesthetics of movement described in this chapter.

⁶⁷ This order is maintained in the authoritative *Riverside Chaucer*, which was created as a revision of F. N. Robinson’s edition, based on the Ellesmere Manuscript, MS EL 26 C 9. This edition, and this order of tales, is followed by the majority of Chaucerians, and makes a great deal of textual sense, although the order is never explicit in the *Tales* themselves. For a full discussion of this complex issue, see Helen Cooper, *The Structure of the Canterbury Tales* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984). Also see William Elford Rogers, *Upon the Ways: The Structure of the Canterbury Tales* (Victoria, British Columbia, Canada: University of Victoria, 1986).

The picture of this road continues to develop, however, because the path traced by the pilgrims is not linear or singular. Aside from the trajectories of the pilgrims' movements before they come together, which are many—the Knight comes to mind—the unidirectional travel of the group is broken by the disjunctive arrival of the Canon's Yeoman and the Canon, and the abrupt flight of the latter. The boundaries of the group are permeable, and its movement through space is a multidirectional network.⁶⁸ This multiplicity of movement becomes even clearer—and, importantly, more confusing—when the lens moves a step further into the diegetic context of the *Tales*. Their path mirrors a historical road, it creates a road in narrative, and the narratives within the narrative depict a complex network of physical movements. A huge number of the tales are stories of travel, and in many cases rely on various forms of spatial movement to fuel their aesthetic power.⁶⁹

The Canterbury Tales, then, in its entire fragmentary being, is characterized by multi-layered and multidirectional, often chaotic, movement through space. This is true in the overarching frame narrative, within individual narratives—many of which could, individually, be the fruitful focus of a chapter about Chaucer's aesthetics of movement—and even in its allusion to historical spaces of transition. Most important of all, though, may simply be Chaucer's choice to locate his great collection of tales in motion, on the

⁶⁸ As we could also say of the House of Rumor, this “multidirectional network” can be usefully related to Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic theory. It is characterized, like the rhizome, by “multiplicities, lines, strata and segmentarities, lines of flight and intensities,” interconnected, and resistant to fixed points and orders. Chaucer, like Deleuze and Guattari, is concerned with “mapping” this kind of mobile network. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 4, 6. This comparison suggests a reading of *The Canterbury Tales*, in terms of space and movement, as a precursor to certain key threads of postmodern thought, such as this one.

⁶⁹ Chief among these tales of movement are the Man of Law's Tale, the Miller's Tale, and the romances: The tales of the Knight, the Wife of Bath, and the Squire.

road. This, I argue, is the final and lastingly powerful manifestation of Chaucer's turn toward a literature of movement. Much of the dynamism and effectiveness of *The Canterbury Tales* arises from its mobile context, and in creating this work Chaucer reveals fully the importance of motion to his vision for Middle English poetry. I hope to have shown in the preceding pages, however, that this turn toward an aesthetics of motion did not begin with the *Tales*, but with the early dream visions. Early in his career, from his position over Aldgate, the space of the dream narrative provided a setting for Chaucer's poetic experimentation. His explorations were colored by his mobile position and activity in the world, as well as his engagement with contemporary natural philosophy, forming a kinetic vision that strikingly resembles the physics of William of Ockham, especially in its plurality and resistance to stasis. Although the road to Canterbury may rightly continue to be Chaucer's most famous image of movement, the lightning flash of the eagle's appearance in "Geffrey's" dream should be considered alongside it as the explosive beginning of his process of creating movement through poetry.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ *The Book of the Duchess*, the first of Chaucer's dream visions and his earliest major poem, clearly bears many similarities to *The House of Fame* and the *Parliament of the Fowls*. There are early hints in this vision of the importance of movement to Chaucer's poetics. For example, the stasis of the dreamer's position in bed is emphasized, he begins the dream in a static, emphatically textual chamber (similar, but distinct from, the Temple of Glass), and upon leaving this place he lurches into swift movement as part of the hunting party: "'A Goddes half, in good tyme!' quod I, / 'Go we faste!' and gan to ryde" (371-72). He is also "awoken" in the dream by "a gret hep" of "small foules" singing loudly, suggesting a relationship to *The Parliament of the Fowls* (295). There is nothing of the chaos of the later poem in this section, however, and although motion is part of the narrative, it is not nearly as integral a force as in the other two poems, and less closely tied to issues of speech and writing. Chaucer's aesthetics of movement does not appear *ex nihilo* in *The House of Fame*, but this poem does mark a significant shift in his writing, and can accurately be called a beginning.

CHAPTER 2
“AS A FREKE þAT FEY WERE, FORþ GAN I WALKE”:¹
***PIERS PLOWMAN* AS MOBILE AND MOBILIZING FORCE**

A question appears in the opening lines of the first *passus* of *Piers Plowman*: “sestow þis peple, / How bisie þei ben aboute þe maze?” (B.I.5-6). The maze is explicitly the “Fair Field,” Langland’s vision of the world, but the designation applies equally well to *Piers Plowman* itself. The poem is certainly labyrinthine in its difficulty and complexity as an object of critical study, as has been well documented by those who have grappled with it over the years and continue to do so.² *Piers Plowman* is also a maze in a more specific sense, however: like the labyrinth or *domus Daedali* explored in the previous chapter, it is a structure that facilitates irregular, convoluted, wandering movement. The network of motion that characterizes this poem contributes to the

¹ All citations from *Piers Plowman* are from the revised Athlone editions, and unless otherwise noted from the B-text, edited by George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson. William Langland, *Will’s Visions of Piers Plowman, Do-Well, Do-Better and Do-Best: Piers Plowman, the B Version* (London; Berkeley, California: Athlone Press; University of California Press, 1988). (B.XIII.2).

² Derek Pearsall writes that “the structure of the poem is associative and idiosyncratic, the very sequence of materials often difficult to understand, its handling of dream and allegory shifting, inconsistent, opportunistic”; he continues to state that “by any standards but its own it is near to artistic breakdown.” Mary Carruthers begins her first chapter of *The Search for St. Truth* with a confession: “the belief that *Piers Plowman* does mean something is one that its readers and critics have clung to tenaciously, sometimes vainly, often desperately, through the poem’s many incongruities, twists, and turns. It is a belief to which I subscribe as well, though I admit to attacks of doubt along the way.” Fiona Somerset has furthered our understanding of its complexity by arguing that even a single language in this multilingual poem, Latin, should be seen as itself multilingual and fluid, and Emily Steiner sees diversity and multiplicity as the central project and aesthetic object of *Piers Plowman*. Derek Albert Pearsall, “Langland’s London,” in *Written Work: Langland, Labor, and Authorship*, ed. Steven Justice, Kathryn Kerby-Fulton (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 178. Mary J. Carruthers, *The Search for St. Truth: A Study of Meaning in Piers Plowman* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 3. Fiona Somerset, “‘Al þe comonys with o voys atonys’: Multilingual Latin and Vernacular Voice in *Piers Plowman*, *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* 19, no. 1 (2005): 107, 136). Emily Steiner sees especially the Prologue of the B-text as creating a radically new political vision that can only be accessed through poetry, and writes that “it is Langland’s alliterative line, moreover, that helps construct human diversity as an aesthetic object.” Emily Steiner, “*Piers Plowman*, Diversity, and the Medieval Political Aesthetic,” *Representations* 91, no. 1 (2005): 8, 14.

dynamism that has fascinated generations of scholars, such as Emily Steiner, who calls the text a “creative vortex,” and William Elford Rogers, who describes it as “crackl[ing] with energy.”³ In addition to narrating the continual movement of its characters—who are depicted in a nearly eternal state of “*wandrynge*”—*Piers Plowman* functions as a maze for its readers and audience, leading them from one jarring spatial or temporal twist to another for the majority of its thousands of lines. The famous circular trajectory of the poem also significantly contributes to this picture, as well as its engagement with, subversion of, and surprising evocation of other medieval traditions of narrative movement, especially that of the romance quest.

This portrait is still not complete, however, unless we step out of the narrative and examine the *mouvance* of the text itself: from A- to B- to C-Text, and some of the well-documented circumstances that complicate this triad. The motion of *Piers Plowman*, furthermore, is not only the movement of text, but in some cases the movement of history and of actual people of the fourteenth century, and with this in mind this chapter will consider the poem and its circulation in relation to the increasing mobility of England, especially leading up to 1381. Finally, although William Langland does not engage directly with Ockham’s physics or similar theories of motion as Chaucer does in *The House of Fame*, this chapter will seek to demonstrate that *Piers Plowman* significantly furthered the late medieval poeticization of movement through its form. Like Chaucer’s experimentation with motion, Langland’s is multidirectional, irregular, and complex—reminiscent of Ockham’s adjustment of projectile motion to account for “diverse moving

³ Ibid. William Elford Rogers, *Interpretation in Piers Plowman* (Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 3.

things”—but Langland’s is also uniquely disjunctive and politically charged. To read *Piers Plowman* is to experience a unique kind of poetic motion: one that revolutionized late medieval poetry, spoke eloquently to the shifting circumstances of Ricardian England (especially in the context of harsh laws against free travel), and continues to have resonances in English-language poetry more than six centuries after its composition.

SPACE AND MOTION IN *PIERS PLOWMAN*: REVIEW OF SCHOLARSHIP

The organizing structure of *Piers Plowman*—insofar as we can consider it such—is a pilgrimage, and I am of course far from the first reader to notice that something important is going on in the movements of the poem. Often, however, movement is treated glancingly in Langland scholarship, as a contributory element of the poem leading to something more significant, as opposed to the central place it is given in this chapter. The multivalent forms of its movements are also rarely treated together. Some of these studies provide significant insights into the subject, however, and merit inclusion here; some particularly relevant cases demand careful and extended engagement.

Critics who focus on *Piers Plowman* in relation to pilgrimage comprise perhaps the most extensive group of related scholarship. Their work can be generally characterized by a subordination of physical movement to spiritual movement—often focusing on the subversion of the quest in Passus VI—the reverse of my approach in this chapter. Elizabeth Zeeman, for example, falls into this category, and sees *Piers Plowman* as analogous to such texts as *The Scale of Perfection*, a manual detailing the contemplative life as allegorical pilgrimage, and the writings of the anchoress Julian of

Norwich.⁴ These texts are notable for their spatial stasis and spiritual movement, and comparison to them establishes this group of scholarship as in sharp contrast to the few works of *Piers Plowman* criticism that give attention to space, and which tend to offer romance as the most usefully analogous genre to Langland's poem. Some scholars who understand the poem as primarily a narrative of allegorical pilgrimage, including Barbara A. Johnson, categorize *Piers Plowman* with *Pilgrim's Progress*.⁵ Mary Carruthers' seminal work can also be understood in this context: in her reading, physical movement is secondary, although to epistemological rather than spiritual motion.⁶

Those who have highlighted the spatial elements of the poem, often in terms of architecture and landscape, comprise another category of Langland criticism from which a study of motion in *Piers Plowman* can draw. Kari Kalve, for example, notes that "scholars tend to ignore the spatial relationships throughout the poem"; her own argument focuses on interior, architectural space, but in relation to this she observes that "the failure to describe any beneficial crossing from outside to inside throughout this long narrative poem indicates how much the author's imagination was fixed in open, public spaces."⁷ Critics like Kalve have helped to lay the groundwork for studies of Langlandian

⁴ Elizabeth Zeeman, "Piers Plowman and the Pilgrimage to Truth," in *Style and Symbolism in Piers Plowman: A Modern Critical Anthology*, ed. Robert J. Blanch (Knoxville, Tennessee: University of Tennessee Press, 1969), 118-30.

⁵ Barbara A. Johnson, *Reading Piers Plowman and the Pilgrim's Progress: Reception and the Protestant Reader* (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992).

⁶ Carruthers, *The Search for St. Truth: A Study of Meaning in Piers Plowman*.

⁷ Kari Kalve, "'Truthe is Thereinne': The Spaces of Truth and Community in *Piers Plowman B*," in *Place, Space, and Landscape in Medieval Narrative*, ed. Laura L. Howes (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007), 153.

motion by demonstrating the importance of physical space to *Piers Plowman*'s thematic and narrative structure, as well as the importance of movements across boundaries.

Two works of criticism in particular deserve attention, despite the fifty years of scholarship since their publication, for the ways in which they predicted and laid the groundwork for later studies of motion in *Piers Plowman*: Elizabeth Salter's *Piers Plowman: An Introduction* and Charles Muscatine's "Locus of Action in Medieval Narrative." Salter, who saw the greatest significance of the poem in its "magnificence as a work of religious art," a story of spiritual pilgrimage, also effectively turned the conversation toward the importance of its overall fluidity.⁸ She calls attention to its "spontaneity of verse movement," its "fluctuating richness of connected meanings," and its lack of fixed location and direction despite its overall "movement towards truth by way of love."⁹ Most importantly, she understands the perpetual motion of the poem and its significance "almost as an end in itself," providing an expression of this significance:

During the whole of our reading we are being reminded of the activity proper to poet, dreamer and reader—that of journeying. When we are reconciled to this unceasing movement, and can accept exploration almost as an end in itself, then we are in a fit state to receive, perhaps at most unexpected moments, the fruits of exploration.¹⁰

Although her primary focus lies elsewhere, Salter's concise book begins to suggest the importance and uniqueness of motion in the narrative and verse form of *Piers Plowman*.

While she expresses the overall fluidity of its structure, however, she still sees its

⁸ Elizabeth Salter, *Piers Plowman: An Introduction* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1962), 1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 2, 9, 57.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 90.

dominant movement as unidirectional, as do Carruthers and Elizabeth Zeeman. “We may not be quite sure of allegorical locations,” she writes, “but we *are* sure of our gradual, though indirect, movement towards truth by way of love.”¹¹

Charles Muscatine furthered our understanding of the importance and nature of movement in *Piers Plowman* significantly, yet few writers have chosen to continue his line of inquiry. He begins “Locus of Action in Medieval Narrative” by describing two tendencies of spatial representation proposed by art historians: the “planimetric,” a medieval schema in which space is emblematic rather than realistic, and a countertendency, supposedly characteristic of the Renaissance, “to deepen, localize, and integrate space.”¹² The late medieval Gothic exists in tension between these two modes of representation: realistic and deeply textured sections of space—and objects in space—that yet have an emblematic, or unrealistic relationship to other portions of a work of art. For Muscatine, concepts of space and action within space are equally central to literature as they are to the visual arts: “the sense of place, of the here, the elsewhere, the there, is so deeply imbedded in our own patterning of experience that we cannot help imposing it on narrative.”¹³ Furthermore, he contends, “the orientation of the action in space”—in other words, movement—can provide a narrative with more than organization: “it can give it meaning.”¹⁴

¹¹ Ibid., 57.

¹² Charles Muscatine, “Locus of Action in Medieval Narrative,” *Romance Philology* 17, no. 1 (1963): 116.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 117.

For Muscatine, *The Divine Comedy* is the perfect example of the tension and balance between these two conceptual arrangements. Dante simultaneously creates movement through two overlapping settings, the first designed to express “immutable moral relationships,” the second to “represent psychological and emotional experience”: the drama and immediacy of the pilgrim’s earthly movements.¹⁵ Pilgrimage is the context in which the two Gothic spatial systems exist together most readily—the individual steps providing realism and immediacy; the larger direction of the journey the immutable moral relationships—and Dante’s work places them in perfect balance, thus achieving coherent meaning.¹⁶ *Piers Plowman*, for Muscatine, is an altogether different story. Its organization gives it the potential for this balance, but it is never achieved. Instead, “Langland’s space seems surrealistic, unlike the space of any predecessor”; he is aware of both modes, but constantly shifting between them, allowing neither to control the narrative.¹⁷ Muscatine characterizes the Prologue of B as schematic (emblematic), but with “tiny settings of realistic depth and vigor”; this is not mere disorganization, but strategy: “the technique here is even swifter and more suggestive than in Dante.”¹⁸ Compared to Dante’s, Langland’s writing is far more jarring, surrealistic, and characterized by flashes of action: human activity is a “heaping and piling” of individual

¹⁵ Ibid., 118-19.

¹⁶ Ibid., 119-20.

¹⁷ Ibid., 120.

¹⁸ Ibid.

scenes and images.¹⁹ Finally, Muscatine provides direct application of this mobility of spatial representation and action to the religious significance of the poem, for:

Such a formal trait in poetry must have a profound consequence for meaning. [...] While at every turn the discrete, isolable episodes—the overt statements—proclaim conservative Christian doctrine, the surrealistic spatial context creates a sense of instability.²⁰

Muscatine's reading is convincing, and the current study is indebted to it. As the close of his article suggests, however, it asks as many questions as it answers, and there is far more to be said by building on—and questioning—the claims in these few brief pages. The following sections seek to do so by enriching and adjusting this description of Langlandian motion as surrealistic through a more comprehensive study of the vortex of movements surrounding and within the poem.

NARRATIVE MOVEMENT

The first trajectory of movement in *Piers Plowman* is “narrative,” or *narrated* motion through space, corresponding to what Ockham called *motu localis* or *motu ad ubi*. Like *The House of Fame* and *The Parliament of the Fowls* but with greater complexity—and greater disorganization—*Piers Plowman* is primarily a narrative of journeying. It begins with travelling “wide in þis world,” and its basic unit of structure, the “*passus*,” meaning “step,” indicates that we are to envision the poem as a long walk (B.Prol.4).²¹

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 121-22.

²¹ The commonly used manuscript markings that divide the poem into these sections has been questioned by critics such as Lawrence M. Clopper, but here I contend that there is sufficient evidence for their use and

We would be mistaken to assume that the linear ordering of the steps is an indication of unidirectional movement, however, and it is important to distinguish the poem as a narrative of *journeying*, not of *a journey*. On one level, *Piers Plowman* may be characterized by a single direction—numerous critics have come to this conclusion²²—but if it has anything close to a linear structure it is metaphysical, and not mirrored by narrated spatial movement. In terms of local motion, the poem creates a labyrinth of circularity, jarring and unpredictable transportations, passages between various levels of dreaming, abrupt shifts in moving subjects, and—interlaced among all of this—wandering across a murky English landscape dotted with surprisingly grounded references to historical place.

As Ockham theorizes, a motion is shaped by the space through which it moves,²³ and an understanding of *Piers Plowman*'s landscapes is necessary to define the kinds of movements at work in the poem. The emphatic placement of spatial description, and the fact that, as Kari Kalve contends, this poem privileges the open landscape, suggests that it deserves particular attention.²⁴ *Piers Plowman*'s landscape includes not only fields, forests, and mountains, but the roads—facilitators and records of movement—that pass

so follow them along with the vast majority of the poem's editors. Lawrence M. Clopper, "Langland's Markings for the Structure of 'Piers Plowman,'" *Modern Philology* 85, no. 3 (1988).

²² Mary Carruthers, for example, argues that the poem is characterized by movement toward epistemological clarity. Morton Bloomfield understands *Piers Plowman* as a quest toward Christian perfection, while Steven Kruger sees it as the narrative of a journey inward, into the self. Carruthers, *The Search for St. Truth: A Study of Meaning in Piers Plowman*. Morton W. Bloomfield, *Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth-Century Apocalypse* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1962), 4. Steven F. Kruger, "Mirrors and the Trajectory of Vision in *Piers Plowman*," *Speculum* 66, no. 1 (1991): 74.

²³ Ockham, *Expositio in libros physicorum aristotelis*, 409.

²⁴ Kalve, "Truthe is Thereinne," 153.

through these spaces. The famous Prologue of the B-text begins with such a description of place, complete with concrete geographical details, and a narrative of wandering through this landscape:

In a somer seson whan softe was þe sonne
I shoop me into [a] shrou[d] as I a sheep weere;
In habite as an heremite, vnholý of werkes,
Wente wide in þis world wondres to here.
Ac on a May morwenyng on Maluerne hilles
Me bifel a ferly, of Fairye me þoʒte.
(B. Prol.1-5)²⁵

Stephen H. A. Shepherd and Elizabeth Robertson note that “the original dialect of the poem suggests the poet came from west Worcestershire near the Malvern Hills he mentions in the Prologue,” and other critics have agreed that this specific reference speaks to the poet’s likely knowledge of and engagement with his home landscape.²⁶ Nor is this the last reference to this familiar landscape; mentions reoccur in the poem, giving the impression that Malvern Hills is a place of concrete reference and preoccupation about which Will—the character and perhaps the author—is knowledgeable. To express impossibility later in the Prologue, Langland employs the tantalizing image of “measuring mist” in this place, musing: “thow myʒtest bettre meete myst on Maluerne hilles” (B.Prol.215). Langland’s interest in *place* is immediately apparent and specific, as is the complex relationship he presents between the England of perhaps the poet’s own experience, the landscape of England in the narrative, and the dreamscapes. The Prologue

²⁵ For this chapter, the majority of references will be to the B-Text, since it is widely held to be the most representative of the long process of compositions and revision of the poem, as well as being in some ways the most dynamic of the three main texts.

²⁶ Elizabeth Robertson and Stephen H. A. Shepherd, “Preface,” in *Piers Plowman* (New York: Norton and Co., 2006). Jay Martin, “Wil as Fool and Wanderer in *Piers Plowman*,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 3, no. 4 (1962).

continues to be interested in specific features and types of landscape as the narrator falls asleep looking at the waters “vnder a brood bank by a bourn[e] syde,” and as he crosses into a dreamscape for the first time, he narrates of himself “that I was in a wilderness, wiste I neuere where” (B.Prol.8-12).

This new dream wilderness is marked by specific features of landscape as well: “a tour on a toft,” “a deep dale bynepe,” and, of course, “a fair feeld ful of folk” (B.Prol.14-17). Whether we are to envision this latter feature as a level plain, a cultivated field, or a field intended for a fair as Roy J. Percy suggests, it is notable that it is an open landscape in which people of all professions go about their lives, “werchyng and wandryng as þe world askep” (B.Prol.19).²⁷ This key line is worth attention; “the world” asks two things of all people that seem to be related and given equal standing: to work and to *wander*. This simple juxtaposition of verbs, which may seem innocuous and almost pastoral, is in fact suggestive of a radical position: that wandering, and the freedom to do so, is fundamental to human existence. From the perspective of those in power in the mid- to late fourteenth century, the verbs *werchen* [werken] and *wandren* were in fact antithetical, the latter a threat to the prior. The brutal Statute of Labourers following the plague of 1348, and the slightly less draconian measures that followed it, are a vivid historical testament to the fact that an increasingly mobile work force was considered one of the greatest dangers to upper class stability during Langland’s lifetime. The act, by a

²⁷ In “Langland’s *Fair Feld*,” Percy argues that “faire” is derived not from the Old English *faezer* but from the Old French *feire*, “and that Langland’s *fair feeld* is not necessarily either level or lovely, but simply the site, within a village or on the outskirts of a town, reserved as the location for a periodic (generally annual) fair.” Roy J. Percy, “Langland’s Fair Feld,” *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* 11, no. 1 (1997): 40. He notes, however that this interesting observation is only consistent with the A-text as the poem progresses, and argues that the image was abandoned as the poet developed later portions of the B- and C-revisions.

member of the working class, of walking away from the land one was expected to work was considered such a crime that it was punished with the branding of an “F” for “*fauxine*” [falsity] on the forehead of the offending wanderer.²⁸

The Middle English definition of *wandren* bears out this connection. Although this complex verb was already sometimes used with something like its modern English connotation (“to walk or move about aimlessly, because lost”), this is not its primary medieval definition, which in fact relates to purpose and freedom: “to go out walking,” “to go freely,” “to have the power to walk,” to “be released from lameness or paralysis,” or “to move at will.”²⁹ From the beginning of the poem the ability to move at will (suggesting a possible connection to the dreamer’s name, “Will”), to be free from the paralysis and stasis imposed by the contemporary legal system, is depicted as a fundamental aspect of existence in the world, regardless of class. As Langland’s narrative continues, it remains consistent with this perspective, and travel is given a privileged place in the poem’s vision; only four lines into the text we already see Will walking “wide in þis world,” setting the tone for the work (B.Prol.4). When Langland collapses the entire world of human activity into a single place, he does not choose an urban image as might be expected—a kind of *cosmopolis* or world city—but instead chooses a natural landscape in which some of the professions listed do not exist comfortably. This choice presents those in agricultural professions and those who wander the world in their

²⁸ Kellie Robertson, *The Laborer’s Two Bodies: Literary and Legal Productions in Britain, 1350-1500* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 2. Mark O’Brien, *When Adam Delved and Eve Span: A History of the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381* (Cheltenham, U. K.: New Clarion, 2004), 17.

²⁹ *The Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. “wandren,” April 24, 2013, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med>.

element, while others, such as “Bisshopes and Bachelers,” seem strikingly out of place (B.Prol. 87).

The world’s call to wander mentioned in the Prologue is further developed in the moments between dreams, when we see the dreamer repeatedly awaken, walk a certain distance over the landscape, and fall asleep again. As in the very first lines of the poem, significant attention is given to the landscape over which Will travels and its specific features. Will certainly takes many steps, or “*passi*,” in each of these sections. He walks through the world in such a way that the narrative’s focus is upon the act of walking and the spaces through which he walks rather than any ultimate destination.

At the beginning of Passus V, the dreamer awakens and immediately narrates: “ac er I hadde faren a furlong feyntise me hente / That I ne myzte ferþer a foot for defaute of slepyng” (B.V.5-6). No sooner does he awake than he feels an impulse to “faren,” to make his way across the landscape. In Passus VII, his post-dream desire to journey is emphasized to a still greater extent and is more firmly grounded in a physical landscape:

The preest and Perkyn [a]pposeden eiper ooper,
And [þoru] hir wordes I wook] and waited aboute,
And seiþ þe sonne [euene] South sitte þat tyme,
Metelees and moneilees on Maluerne hilles.
Musynge on þis metels, [a myle] wey ich yede.
(B.VII.144-48)

He has traveled, and walks a mile after his dream, but he is still rooted in place; more than anything else, the landscape is the device he uses to mark reality as opposed to the dream—from the unknown wilderness, he is again in a familiar place in sight of Malvern Hills. At the beginning of the next *passus*, Will’s movement is taken a step further when he narrates: “thus, yrobed in russet, I romed aboute / Al a somer seson for to seke dowel”

(B.VIII.1-2). Despite Will's assurance that he "ha[s] no savour in songewarie" [dreamlore], he allows a quest in the dream to become a season-long quest through the physical landscape of England (B.VII.154). Soon after, as Will travels "widewher," he comes upon a "wode" and falls asleep listening to birds "vnder a lynde vpon a launde" (B.VIII.62-65). As soon as he stops walking to sleep, however, he is jerked back into the frenetic pace of the dream, with the effect that the narratives of walking are more soothing for the reader—experienced as moments of slower pacing and "rest"—than the moments in which the dreamer is sleeping. Paradoxically, the incessant travel of the dreamer outside of the dreams subtly slows the poem's pacing; so frenetic is the motion of the dreams that relatively simple movement across a landscape is experienced, comparatively, as rest. Langland never allows his narrator to stand still, and although the dreamer lives out one of the other fourteenth-century definitions of *wandren*: "to set out walking under compulsion," this compulsion is not the profoundly painful banishment and exile of earlier English poems of wandering.³⁰ Through this structure, Langland's poem subtly communicates a conviction that wandering can be a source of greater solace than remaining in one place. Depicting this Everyman, Langland's model for human life, as in compulsive, perpetual, and positively-represented motion suggests that he should be emulated by readers in some form, underlining the poem's role as a mobilizing force in an increasingly mobile culture.

As time passes, the distances Will travels between dreams only become longer, and the beginning of Passus XIII provides the richest description of this phenomenon.

³⁰ Ibid.

Will narrates: “and I awaked þerewiþ, witlees nerhande, / And as a freke þat [fey] were forþ gan I walke / In manere of a mendynaunt, many yer after”; Donaldson translates the second line: “And like some one under a spell I started to walk” (B.XIII.1-3). Will is *compelled* to walk, and in this passage he does not walk a furlong or a mile as before, but *many yer after*. Compulsively walking, at this point, is not a temporary condition, but a state of being: a way of life. Even outside of the feverish pace of the dreams themselves, *Piers Plowman* presents a picture of constant movement through physical space. Movement, and movement that pays attention to and gives rich descriptions of the landscapes through which it passes, dominates the narrative.

Will is not the only individual who apparently exists in a state of never-ending motion. The visions are peopled by compulsive walkers, wanderers, riders, and travelers of all kinds. In the Prologue we meet “Pilgrymes and Palmeres” who “wenten forþ in hire wey” and “bidderes and beggeres” who “faste aboute yede”; the first vision of human life is already represented as a seething network of emphatically rapid movements (B.Prol.40-48). The first words spoken to the dreamer—by Holy Church, the lady who “cam doun from [þe] Castel”—underline this depiction: “sestow þis peple, / How bisie þei ben aboute þe mæze?” (B.I.5-6). While Chaucer more subtly invokes the labyrinth late in *The House of Fame*, Langland foregrounds it in such a way that a reader attentive to the movements of the poem cannot fail to see its importance. These words are more than a description of the people of the Prologue’s Fair Field; they form a kaleidoscopic moment that comments simultaneously upon multiple layers of movement. The reader who continues will find convoluted narrative movement, as well as labyrinthine

organizational structure. Because the Field should be understood as Langland's vision for life on earth, we should also consider the possibility that this word, "maȝe," is Langland's most concise descriptor of his own experience of England in the latter half of the fourteenth century. As will be expanded upon below, this opening comment of Passus I relates to historical representation, to formal elements that will develop as the poem continues, and functions as a signifier of entrance into a new space. Like the knights of romance, the dreamer is entering a labyrinthine landscape, and he has—as we as readers have—been warned.

The cast of characters on the move continues in a dizzying blur as the unruly mob (including Mede) meets at a mountain, surges on to Westminster—another concrete spatial referent within the confusion of the dream—and again "fareþ forþ togideres," "on hire feet [iotten]," and "folwe[b]," while Conscience the knight "priked [forþ on] his palfrey and passed hem alle" (B.II.183-90). Passus II ends with more verbs of movement as "alle" the people "fledden" and "flowen" into "hernes" [hiding places; corners] (B.II.236).³¹ Conscience and Reason ride purposefully to new locations again and again, while the majority of the sections begin with a narration of motion. In the fifth *passus*, a pilgrim appears—most of the persons in the visions, including Piers, can be understood as "apparitions" for the suddenness of and lack of context for their arrival³²—who comes from "[þe Sepulcre]," has been "[at Bethlem, [at] Babiloyne," "In Armonyne, in

³¹ George Kane, in *Piers Plowman: Glossary, Will's Visions of Piers Plowman, Do-Well, Do-Better and Do-Best: A Glossary of the English Vocabulary of the A, B, and C Versions as Presented in the Athlone Editions* (London: Continuum, 2005).

³² Adorno refers to aesthetically powerful art as "apparition," comparing it to the fleeting appearance and disappearance of deities in shrines—a sudden flash of beauty. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 3.

Alisaundre, in manye opere places,” and who has “walked [wel] wide in weet and in drye” (B.V.526-30). In Passus XIV we suddenly meet an individual who explicitly personifies a life of movement: *Activa vita*, or “Haukyn, þe Actif man,” who some scholars, including Laurence M. Clopper, have considered to be in part a manifestation of the dreamer himself and so elevated in importance above the crowd of allegorical figures.³³

These are only a few of the relevant examples, but to prolong such a list—without even including the dynamic movement of the pilgrimage that many have argued is central to the poem—would be unnecessarily exhaustive. Three famous lines from the end of *Piers Plowman* will serve for a last, and critical, poetic moment: “‘by crist!’ quod Conscience þo, ‘I wole bicom a pilgrim, / And [wenden] as wide as þe world [renneþ] / To seken Piers þe Plowman’” (B.XX.380-82). In a fluidity characteristic of this poem’s form, Conscience the knight, who has been a nexus of movement in the preceding books but not the protagonist, embodies and continues the poem’s circular motion as the dreamer awakens for the last time. From beginning to end, within and outside of the dreams, a reader is thrown in rapidly shifting directions to follow the interweaving movements of the poem’s actors.

Passage across the boundary between dreams forms a final layer of narrative motion that is extraordinarily complex in *Piers Plowman* compared to other contemporary dream visions of the late fourteenth century. The organization of Chaucer’s poems in the genre is, by comparison, simple. *The Book of the Duchess* and *The*

³³ Laurence M. Clopper, “The Life of the Dreamer, the Dreams of the Wanderer in ‘Piers Plowman,’” *Studies in Philology* 86, no. 3 (1989): 281.

Parliament of the Fowls are surprising and unique in many ways, but in terms of this element of narrative structure they follow the expected form: the dreamer is introduced, he sleeps, the vision occurs, and he awakens. *The House of Fame* only departs from this in its ragged ending. In one of our other finest examples of the genre, *Pearl*, the passages between dream and “reality” are memorably powerful and jarring, but still follow this basic format. *Piers Plowman* only shares in this schema in that it begins with the dreamer falling asleep and ends with his awakening; otherwise it is wildly divergent and innovative. By the count of Robertson and Shepherd, “it proves to comprise not one, but eight dreams, with two additional dreams within dreams.”³⁴ These passages from a dream into another dream are particularly unique, having no literary precedent, and contribute dramatically to the maze of *Piers Plowman*’s narrative structure. Furthermore, these transitional movements are neither straightforward nor even easy to identify. The first is perhaps the gentlest, but it is heralded by the enigmatic suggestion that it comes “of Fairye me þoʒte,” a detail absent from other works in the dream vision genre but characteristic of some romances, and seldom an indicator of simplicity or comfort. Other transitions between dream-states are the result of bird-song, loud debate, chaotic motion, or—in particularly disjunctive cases—nothing: the reader simply discovers from context after the fact that he or she reading or hearing the narration of a new dream.

In the C-Text, the framing of the dream-within-a-dream that spans from Passus XI to Passus XIII is particularly jarring. It begins with the narration:

Tho wepte y for wo and wrathe of here wordes
And in a wyntyng y warth and wonderliche me mette

³⁴ Robertson and Shepherd, “Preface,” xi.

For y was rauysched rihte there; fortune me fette
And into þe lond of longyng [and loue] she me brouhte.
(C.XIII.164-67)³⁵

The “inner dream” ends, two sections later, with “tho cauhte y colour anoen and comesede to ben aschamed / And awakede þerwith” (C.XIII.212-13).³⁶ Where the clarity of the boundary removes some of the whiplash effect of the transition, as in this example, the verbs carry connotations of a forceful abduction (“rauysched”);³⁷ the transportation is rapid, unwilling, and surrounded by painful emotion. At times, the reader seems to be similarly dragged through these transitions: before, or as soon as, we are able to “find our footing” in a dream and begin to understand the characters and setting, we are torn out of it into a new location. In terms of its experience, this narrative process contributes to the poem’s impression of endless, unpredictable motion at least as significantly as its descriptions of spatial movement.

FORMAL MOVEMENT

Although it is more difficult to define, “formal movement” facilitates a reader’s experience of motion in *Piers Plowman* even more directly than narrated movement. Whatever the subject of narration in a given moment in the poem, its form is inescapable, and refuses to fade into the background. A more well-ordered or stable meter might have become the fabric of the poem, disappearing itself and highlighting the subject matter,

³⁵ William Langland, *Piers Plowman: The C Version; Will’s Versions of Piers Plowman, Do-Well, Do-Better, and Do-Best* (London; Berkeley: Athlone Press; University of California Press, 1997).

³⁶ Steven F. Kruger, who also notes the painful frame that these lines comprise, uses the term “inner dream.” Kruger, “Mirrors and the Trajectory of Vision in *Piers Plowman*,” 78.

³⁷ Kane. The same word is used in the B-Text, as well (B.XI.7).

but this could not be less true of Langland's line. His form is *insistent*, and it generates the phenomenon of movement. This effect is created, first, through pacing. Its long alliterative line, and even the length of the poem and individual scenes or descriptions, and the placement of certain phonemes, create a rapid, "clipping" effect of implacably rushing—or being rushed—forward. Pacing is also interwoven into what I consider the second element of *Piers Plowman's* formal movement: variation. If this rushing, clipping pace were unrelieved, it would cease to create the effect of motion, but sections of slower, warmer, more spondaic verse occasionally break up its staccato. This creates a sense of motion in the shift itself, a new and more contemplative or processional speed of movement in its own pacing, and reminds a reader of the headlong velocity of Langland's characteristic line—although such a thing is difficult to pin down—when it returns. This variation, as numerous studies have elucidated in painstaking detail—also involves length of line and type of alliteration.³⁸ In one of the most informative and recent formal studies of Langland's alliterative variety, Macklin Smith provides the following description:

William Langland evidently used alliteration with extraordinary versatility, both as a normative marker of metrically realized stress and as an optional prosodic feature. Within the line, he might alliterate two, three, or four metrical stresses, as well as extra stresses or non-stresses, and might insert a second alliterative grouping, arranging dual collocations in adjunctive, chiasmic, or interlaced configurations. Beyond this, he might link adjacent lines in manifold ways, often

³⁸ Macklin Smith, using Schmidt's taxonomy, observes the typical "aa/ax" alliterative form, plus "ten other 'variant' alliterative types, some relatively common, some extremely rare." Macklin Smith, "Langland's Alliterative Line(s)," *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* 23 (2009): 173. For the variety of Langland's alliteration, see also George Kane, "Introduction," in *Piers Plowman: The A Version: Will's Visions of Piers Plowman and Do-Well* (London; Berkeley, California: Athlone Press; University of California, Press, 1988), 115-16. "Music 'neither unpleasant nor monotonous,'" in *Chaucer and Langland: Historical and Textual Approaches* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 87-89. A. V. C. Schmidt, *The Clerkly Maker: Langland's Poetic Art* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1987), 62-67.

coordinating their intralinear and interlinear collocations so as to mark expansive thematic associations.³⁹

I argue that the chief effects of this variety are (1) that the poem's formal elements refuse to fade into the background, but remain in the foreground, causing an awareness of the way we as readers travel from word to word and line to line, and (2) that it refuses the potential complacency of a consistent rhythm. Like Will and the other persons who momentarily take the role of protagonist, readers are not allowed to "move" in one direction or one mode of travel, but are implicated in the poem's labyrinth in their experience of the poem. This marriage of form and content—that the varied structure of Langland's lines matches the multidirectional tangle of narrative movements in the poem—strongly suggests design on the part of the poet. Whether intentional or "out of control," it generates a formal complexity and mobility worthy of the poem's shifting images, overlapping spaces, and elusive plot.⁴⁰

Already within the Prologue we experience one of the most dramatic pacing shifts—in this case, acceleration—from the stately and thoughtful pace of "in a somer seson whan softe was þe sonne" to something vastly different by the Prologue's end

³⁹ Smith, "Langland's Alliterative Line(s)," 163.

⁴⁰ The debate over the intentionality of *Piers Plowman's* unique form is as old as scholarship about the poem. Macklin Smith, for example, places himself in opposition to a line of argumentation since Skeat that criticizes Langland for not paying attention to meter. Instead, he sees him as an innovator, crediting him with "the invention of a verse system in occasional tension with metrical expectations, not neglect of meter," and calling this "evidence of resolute originality." Ibid., 170. Hugh White, on the other hand, takes "Langland to be a poet not securely in control of his material and his poem to show signs of this lack of control, of, perhaps we might say, its unachieved condition." Hugh White, *Nature and Salvation in Piers Plowman* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1988), 2.

(B.Prol.1). Elizabeth Salter refers to the pace of these first lines as “sleepy movement.”⁴¹ The soft sibilance of the alliteration of initial letters, continued in the next line, “I shoop me into [a] shrou[d] as I a sheep weere,” create this hypnotic pace alongside the “n”s and “m”s of “in,” “somer,” “seson,” “whan,” and “sonne.” These latter alliterations, especially read aloud, force the reader to slow enunciation—most of all for the double-voiced “nn” of “sonne.” This warm and, in terms of its content, unsurprising Middle English slowly draws the reader into an idyllic setting, a setting in which one might expect “a ferly, of Fairye” to befall and an orderly narrative to follow.

A reader expecting this would be disappointed far earlier than the end of the Prologue—even in the third line, “vnholly of werkes” enigmatically upsets expectations—but although the stately pacing of the line continues into the initial depiction of the dreamscape, it soon transforms. Over the course of a short 200 lines, it has become the following:

Of alle kynne lybbynge laborers lopen forþ somme,
 As dykeres and deluers þat doon hire ded[e] ille
 And dryueþ forþ þe longe day with ‘*Dieu saue dame Emme*’.
 Cokes and hire knaues cryden, ‘hote pies, hote!
 Goode gees and grys! go we dyne, go we!’
 Tauerners [t]il hem tolden þe same:
 ‘White wyn of Oseye and wyn of Gascoigne,
 Of þe Ryn and of þe Rochel þe roost to defie!’
 (B.Prol.223-30)

The shocking thematic shift from the beginning to the end of the Prologue—from grand narrative of fantasy and pilgrimage to the grittiness of overheard shouts in kitchens and

⁴¹ Salter makes this characterization in the context of her description of Langland’s “wide range of rhythmical variation.” She argues that he “exploits to the full the rhythmical potentiality of the accentual line,” and elsewhere notes that Langland’s “sharp forthrightness of diction and spontaneity of verse-movement give us often a direct entry into *Piers Plowman*,” allowing us to “respond to the movement of *Piers Plowman* as to a contemporary verse pattern.” Salter, *Piers Plowman: An Introduction*, 19, 2, 3.

taverns—is important but well documented, especially by the many scholars interested in *Piers Plowman* as primarily a social document. The shift in form, however, is equally shocking: the alliterative lines have lengthened and are now irregular cascades of words, the vocabulary has shifted from that of conventional high poetry to technical professional language and urgent everyday speech, and the staccato of “t,” “d,” “c,” and “k” has replaced sibilance. Macaronic verse, a characteristic of Langland’s knottiest passages, has also entered the scene.

The effect of these lines is analogous to some of the passages of most dramatically mobile form in Chaucer’s *The Parliament of the Fowls* and *The House of Fame*, written a few years later and explored in detail in the previous chapter. The cooks’ and knaves’ cries of “hote, pies, hote! / Goode gees and grys! go we dyne, go we!” are strikingly paralleled by the “kek kek! Kokkow! Quek quek! “ and “have don, and lat us wende!” of Chaucer’s birds.⁴² Although Langland’s words cannot claim to be truly onomatopoeic, they are chosen for their sound more than their meaning, and presented as habitual and familiar cries, like the cries of birds. In both cases, their importance is in the chaotic din they create—a warm and earthy cacophony that implies and is experienced as a flurry of motion. This section ending is also reminiscent of the chaotic closing of *The House of Fame*, in which the crowd in the House of Rumor suddenly scatters, steps on one another’s heels, piles into a heap, and cries out in chopped, confused phrases.⁴³ Even the last line of Langland’s Prologue, present in only some manuscripts, “[al þis I seiȝ

⁴² Chaucer, *The Parliament of the Fowls*, lines 492-98.

⁴³ Chaucer, *The House of Fame*, lines 2141-54.

slepyng and seuene sythes more],” fails to close the sequence neatly and is loosely reminiscent of the later additions to Chaucer’s poem that attempt to identify the “man of grete auctoritee” (B.Prol.231). One important formal distinction between the two poems, however, is that Chaucer’s is written in neat octosyllabic, rhyming couplets. Langland’s fluid alliterative line, particularly varied here (ranging from nine to at least fourteen syllables), significantly amplifies the chaotic verse-movement of the passage. This variation, too, contributes to the surprisingly organic quality of the passage. The form of the alliterative verse refuses to fade into the background, even as Langland’s use of so many different line lengths and structures allows for it to alter with the content, rather than the content being rigidly conformed to a set poetic rhythm.

At other moments in the poem, in part because of this very freedom and innovation, Langland’s verse-movement—unlike Chaucer’s—becomes almost unreadable. This is particularly true when he strings together untenably long phrases as place-names (still unwieldy even with the hyphens introduced by modern editors), such as in the following lines, only a section of a long passage:

So shaltow se swere-noȝt-but-it-be-for-nede-
 And-nameliche-on-ydel-þe-name-of-god-almyȝty.
 Thanne shaltow come by a croft, [ac] come þow noȝt þerInne;
 Th[e] croft hatte Coueite-noȝt-mennes-catel-ne-hire-wyues-
 Ne-noon-of-hire-seruauntȝ-nat-noyen-hem-myȝte;
 Loke [þow] breke no bowes þere but if it be [þyn] owene.
 Two stokes þer stondeþ, ac stynte [þow] noȝt þere;
 Thei hiȝte Stele-noȝt-[ne]-Sle-noȝt; strik forþ by boþe; [...]
 Thanne [shalt þow] see seye-sooþ-so-it-be-to-doone-
 In-[no]-manere-ellis-noȝt-for-no-mannes-biddyng.
 (B.V.570-77, 583-84)

Such passages lend credence to arguments like Hugh White's: that Langland is out of control of his verse form, and that the poem's condition is "unachieved."⁴⁴ For the bold and careful reader who does not simply skim over these passages, their effect is truly jarring, and constitutes another layer to the formal mobility of the poem. The lines are painfully extended, any encouragement to pause for breath is removed by the connected name-phrases (hyphenated in modern editions), and the effect is like tumbling headlong down a slope. The tumbling, furthermore, is not smooth; one would expect this shift into breathless verse-movement to be an acceleration, but it is also paradoxically a deceleration. It takes longer to read these lines than the more fluid portions of *Piers Plowman*, and certainly longer than Chaucer's smooth rhymes, in part because of the abrupt and unpredictable moments where the meter and phonetic combinations become particularly awkward. Lines 571 and 584 are examples of this, where "almyzty" and "mannes-biddyng" are torturously squeezed into the ends of the lines. Langland is even more free than usual with his metrical variety here—or perhaps he subordinates his meter to his didactic concerns—and the result is that there is little formal consistency to guide the reader. Salter argues that because of Langland's lack of rhyme or rigid structure we can often experience his poetry naturally as a "contemporary verse form";⁴⁵ despite its "free form," however, it is hard to imagine this to be the case in this passage. Is this the work of an innovator—a writer ahead of his time—or is it simply, in aesthetic terms, bad poetry (or both)? Is it anachronistic to judge these lines aesthetically without appreciation

⁴⁴ White, *Nature and Salvation in Piers Plowman*, 2.

⁴⁵ Salter, *Piers Plowman: An Introduction*, 3.

for their didactic import? Or, what may be a more useful question: can we conclude anything about Langland's aesthetics and large-scale thematic and structural elements from them, or are they anomalous?

It is appropriate that this passage is Piers' narration of an arduous journey—a quest—over an allegorical landscape. Its lengthy phrases certainly dramatize, in verse form, the panting breathlessness that would be shared with the traveler over a great distance, or with a worker in Piers' field, after the subversion of the quest. Its form is consistent with one of the poem's insistent themes: that any kind of movement or development—spiritual, epistemological, spatial, or otherwise—takes work. Perhaps it is most important to consider, though, that this new kind of verse-movement is particularly distinctive, that it arrives suddenly and even disjointedly, and that it marks a shift and generates a new kind of experience of poetic motion. Passages like this—aesthetically successful or not—testify to the incredible depth and breadth of *Piers Plowman's* formal mobility and the freedom that Langland apparently felt to experiment with his alliterative form.

The above examples demonstrate Langland's varied use of poetic structure to generate effects ranging from reverie, organic and chaotic motion, to a kind of jarring, breathless tumbling. At other times, Langland is able to draw simple power and directness from his alliterative line that is unsurpassed in the works of his great alliterative contemporaries, notably the *Pearl/Gawain*-poet. These arresting lines tend to appear in “autobiographical” sections, statements of sublime but simple spiritual truth, or in narratives of action. Many such examples exist throughout the three (or more) texts of

this massive poem, including the arrival of the woman to be identified later as “Holy Church.” With the phenomenon of her appearance Langland places himself firmly in a long tradition of dream narratives. As in Boethius’ *Consolatio*, Alain de Lille’s *De planctu naturae*, Dante’s *Purgatorio*, and (with some variation) in *Pearl*, Langland’s dreamer is confronted by a woman who humbles him for his lack of knowledge, and who embodies a compelling blend of beauty and fear. Compared to the others in this list, his description of this experience is by far the briefest, but all the more arresting for its simplicity: “I was afered of hire face þeiȝ she fair weere” (B.I.10). As the passage continues, it maintains its directness and couples it with realistic conversation, including the famous line: “‘the tour on þe toft,’ quod she, ‘truþe is þerInne” (B.I.12). This form is consistent in her later words, such as “for riȝtfully reson sholde rule yow alle,” the rhythmic “somme in Eyr, somme in erþe, somme in helle depe,” and “whan alle tresors ben tried treuþe is þe beste” (B.I.54, 125, 207). In addition to their rhythm, gnomic meaning, and simple, often monosyllabic vocabulary, these lines are strikingly regular in meter—eleven syllables with four stresses—especially striking because they immediately follow the chaotic form of the end of the Prologue. Whether Langland’s intention was to highlight these lines as moments of clarity or to create contrasting pacing shifts with the other, irregular sections of verse for aesthetic impact, both effects are produced.

Another arrestingly simple poetic line, famous for its potential autobiographical significance, is found in Passus XV: “‘I haue lyued in londe’, quod [I], ‘my name is longe wille’” (B.XV.152). Emphatic alliteration, eleven syllables, and direct statement set this line apart. It is also a deeply *grounded* line; in addition to the tantalizing clue formed by

“wille-longe-londe,” this statement, the only one in which the dreamer identifies himself, does so in the context of his activity on the earthly landscape. The surrounding lines tell us that he is referring to his own travels, further underlining the thematic statement throughout *Piers Plowman* that to live on earth is to wander. This directness of form—marked by suddenly straightforward narration and terse syntax—is also characteristic of other first-person accounts of passage across the landscape or into or out of dreamscapes, such as: “wente wide in þis world wondres to here,” “thanne waked I of my wynkyng and wo was withalle,” “and [þoruȝ hir wordes I wook] and waited aboute, / And seiȝ þe sonne [euene] South sitte þat tyme, / Metelees and moneilees on Maluerne hulles. / Musynge on þis metels [a myle] weye ich yede,” “Thus, yrobed in russet, I romed aboute / Al a somer seson for to seke dowel,” “[Th]us I wente widewher [dowel to seke],” and “and awaked þerwiþ; wo was me þanne” (B.Prol.4, V.3, VII.145-48, VIII.1-2, VIII.62, XI.406).

Although *Piers Plowman* is structurally circular on one level and multidirectional on others, it still moves toward a climax in the final Passus, marked by an elevation of style, dramatic action, and a turn toward lines of simple form and grand narrative significance. This is especially true after the dreamer enters the final dream, and “Antecrist cam þanne” (B.XX.53). The battle with Antichrist is powerfully narrated in lines of eleven syllables with four stresses: “deep cam dryuyng after and al to duste passhed / Kynges and knyghtes” (B.XX.100-101).⁴⁶ The final words of Conscience at the

⁴⁶ Elizabeth Salter notes the “latent sensuous power” of this line, although she incorrectly attributes it to “the dark onslaught of Antichrist,” when the death is in fact caused by “pokkes and pestilences” brought by “kynde,” closely associated with God (B.XX.98-99). *Ibid.*, 20.

end of the poem—“‘by crist!’ quod Conscience þo, ‘I wol bicomē a pilgrym, / And [wenden] as wide as þe world [renneþ]”—are some of Langland’s most memorable and direct.

These tend to be some of modern readers’ favorite lines from *Piers Plowman*, which is rightly celebrated for its moments of poignant directness. The preceding paragraphs, however, have attempted to show the dynamism of Langland’s chaotic and occasionally bizarre poetic choices, and the power of these moments of simplicity is not unrelated to his convoluted passages. The impact of such lines is drawn in part from their context: because they appear within a labyrinth of chaotically shifting, sometimes convoluted, occasionally macaronic verse forms, their directness and simplicity strikes with a surprising potency. This is the power of formal mobility: alone, the convoluted and labyrinthine passages of *Piers Plowman* would provide no grounding or compass for the reader; if the poem were composed entirely of direct and evenly formed lines, it would lack its elements of organic “realism” and the multilayered maze created by the poem would be flattened. It would, finally, lose the power of verse-movement; the impact created by the more targeted, straightforward lines is amplified by the sense of motion a reader experiences when clipped, breathless, even imagistic long-line verse suddenly becomes regularly-metered, concentrated narration.

***PIERS PLOWMAN* IN THE WORLD**

We know, thanks to the work of literary critics and historians, that *Piers Plowman* was a shaping force in its historical, cultural, and linguistic moment. This poem extended

beyond itself: *Piers Plowman*, a poem of movement, *moved* fourteenth-century England. In the text itself, we can also tentatively trace a number of authorial reactions to historical events. While I argue in Chapter One that the works of Chaucer should also be understood as part of—and *productive of*—the uniquely mobile generative environment of late fourteenth-century England, it is easier to demonstrate and more commonly held that the same is true of *Piers Plowman*. What is not commonly understood, however, and what I seek to continue to demonstrate, is that this is not only true in the famous content of *Piers Plowman* that seems to deal directly with social trends. We also see this in his passages about travel, in sections reminiscent of romance, and in the overall structure and poetic form of the text: Langland poeticized the turbulent motion of his historical moment, and in doing so, subtly altered and increased its speed.

We know that “*Piers Plowman*,” insofar as it can be considered a single text, was composed and revised over approximately twenty years in at least three versions. The “text” at any given point, then—such as the B-text—is a text in process and a site of *mouvance*. Even the accepted ordering of the three texts and their conventional dating has been under attack by Langlandians for some time, however, further complicating this picture.⁴⁷ A number of other versions have been proposed, for example, frequently

⁴⁷ We understand the A-Text as coming first, the B-Text as a significant expansion of it, and the C-Text as a later revision of B; the meticulous research behind the Athlone editions generally upholds this three-text schema, demonstrating that all variants that appear in manuscripts have descended from three archetypal versions. Kane, “Introduction,” 53. George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson, “Introduction,” in *Piers Plowman: The B Version; Will’s Visions of Piers Plowman, Do-Well, Do-Better, and Do-Best*, ed. George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson (London; Berkeley, California: Athlone Press; University of California Press, 1988), 17. George Russell and George Kane, “Introduction,” in *Piers Plowman: The C Version; Will’s Visions of Piers Plowman, Do-Well, Do-Better and Do-Best*, ed. George Russell and George Kane (London; Berkeley, California: Athlone Press; University of California Press, 1997), 62.

including a “Z-Text.”⁴⁸ Just two years ago, Lawrence Warner’s incisive *The Lost History of Piers Plowman* was published, questioning many long held assumptions and calling for “a sharpening of our awareness of what it means to quote ‘the B version,’” as I have done in this chapter.⁴⁹ Warner substantiates his bold claim that “the history of *Piers Plowman* needs to be rewritten, beginning to end,” with manuscript and scribal evidence questioning the belief that B is a revision of C.⁵⁰ Scholars have held for decades that the “more inflammatory” B-Version was known by John Ball and the other leaders of the uprising, while the more conservative C-Text was a product of Langland’s concerned reaction to the violence of 1381; while the Athlone editors also criticize this argument, Warner seeks to turn it on its head by demonstrating “contamination” *from C to B*.⁵¹ Specifically, he argues that Passus XIX and Passus XX came into what we consider the B-Text from the “C Tradition,” and “the primary mode of this ‘contamination’ [...] was via the movement of passages on sheets of loose revision material that could go easily from Langland’s C papers to Bx as copied by the W-M subarchetypal scribe” (Bx being the proposed archetypal B-Text, now lost).⁵² In addition to adding a fascinating material layer to the movements involved in the creation of this poem, this upsets the traditional narrative of the texts’ order and suggests that what we call the B-Text is shaped as much

⁴⁸ Robertson and Shepherd, “Preface,” xi.

⁴⁹ Lawrence Warner, *The Lost History of Piers Plowman: The Earliest Transmissions of Langland’s Work* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), xv.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, ix.

⁵¹ Russell and Kane, “Introduction.” Warner, *The Lost History of Piers Plowman: The Earliest Transmission of Langland’s Work*, xi.

⁵² *Ibid.*, xii.

by “readerly desires for ‘complete’ texts as to its author’s aesthetic vision.”⁵³ Warner’s overarching conceptualization of the production of *Piers Plowman* in contrast to Chaucer’s works, in the tradition of Adrian Johns’ *The Nature of the Book*,⁵⁴ is particularly relevant to the present study:

Chaucer left behind discrete and identifiable poems; Langland left behind—how else to put it?—*Piers Plowman*, a work not able to be attributed to him alone, but rather comprising innumerable acts of production and intervention from the 1360s to today. While we lose something in the recognition that “*Piers Plowman B*” is a modern amalgam of three traditions brought together in the 1390s rather than a unified and complete poem available for quoting by c. 1379, we are abundantly recompensed by the opportunity to witness the formation, not only by Langland himself but also by the jealous scribes of his poetry, of the radically new English cultural landscape of the final decade of Richard II’s reign and Chaucer’s life, whose contours have only begun to be mapped by readers of *Piers Plowman* in its longer shapes and versions.⁵⁵

Although this is perhaps a thought-provoking overcorrection of the traditional view of the B-text, at very least it calls attention to something critical: the “innumerable acts of production and intervention” from which our received versions of the poem descend.

What modern *Piers Plowman* scholarship is increasingly encouraging us to see, although it is not often presented explicitly in relation to this concept, is a poem *in motion*. From the historical, physical movement of the texts between versions and manuscripts “on sheets of loose revision material” to its dramatic variation from text to text, analogous to the movement from one poetic style to another within the texts themselves, there is perhaps no element of this poem that exists in stasis. This does not

⁵³ Ibid., xv.

⁵⁴ Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

⁵⁵ Warner, *The Lost History of Piers Plowman*, 66-67.

mean that we should abandon modern editions or deny the existence of archetypal versions: it means, instead, that the narrative and formal movement of *Piers Plowman* is inseparable from fourteenth-century English historical movements, including manuscript culture.

Piers Plowman, in its multiple forms, responds to and engages with the historical and cultural trends of its time and place—this has been variously held by generations of Langland scholars. The problems facing England toward the end of Edward III’s reign are well documented: financial disaster, the war in France becoming increasingly expensive and unpopular, the king’s instability after his queen’s death in 1369, and his new mistress, Alice Perrers, who was popularly seen as “a symbol of greed and fiscal corruption.”⁵⁶ Certain critics have claimed that Langland’s allegorical figures are meant to refer to specific famous people—such as Lady Meed to Alice Perrers—such a reading contributes to, but is not necessary to see the relevance of *Piers Plowman*’s themes. The “belling of the cat” in the Prologue of the B-Text, Langland’s version of an old myth, is a particularly convincing and frequent subject of this kind of reading. Since at least the nineteenth century, the cat has been variously understood as John of Gaunt or Edward the III, the mice the Houses of Parliament or the commoners, and the kitten as Richard II.⁵⁷ It would take a particularly literal reader not to notice these striking potential parallels. F. R. H. Du Boulay, a historian who is aware of these comparisons but insists that such readings cannot be proven, nonetheless notes a more general analogue between

⁵⁶ F. R. H. Du Boulay, *The England of Piers Plowman: William Langland and his Vision of the Fourteenth Century* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1991), 7.

⁵⁷ Henry Morley, *The Fourteenth Century*, vol. IV. 1: *English Writers: An Attempt Towards a History of English Literature* (London: Cassell and Company, 1889), 293.

Langland's voice and the changes of his historical moment: "Langland's eloquence, however, provides a kind of linguistic parallel to the oratory in parliament we begin to hear in 1376. [...] What was new was public articulation in English, and within the larger chorus of English voices Langland has a special place."⁵⁸

The unlikely central figure of the poem—a complex role in such a work—is particularly relevant to its historical position. This man, whose representation is kaleidoscopic, who knows the way to Truth, who is privileged above all others by God, who looks like the Good Samaritan, who is conflated with Christ, and who eventually replaces Truth as the object of the quest, is introduced as "a Plowman."⁵⁹ This Plowman

⁵⁸ Du Boulay, *The England of Piers Plowman*, 8.

⁵⁹ 'Peter!' quod a Plowman, and putte forþ his hed:
 'I knowe hym as kyndely as clerik doþ his bokes.
 Conscience and kynde wit kened me to his place
 And diden me suren hym [siþþen] to serven hym for euere
 Boþe sowe and sette while I swynke myzte.
 I haue ben his folwere al þis [fourty] winter.'
 (B.V.537-42)

Treþe herde telle herof, and to Piers sente
 To [t]aken is teme and tilien þe erþe,
 And purchaced hym a paroun *a poena & a culpa*
 For hym and for hise heires euermoore after.
 (B.VII.1-4)

Oon semblable to þe Samaritan and somdeel to Piers þe Plow[man]. (B.XVIII.9)

That Piers þe Plowman was peynted al blody
 And com in wiþ a cros bifore þe commune peple,
 And riȝt lik in alle [lymes] to oure lord Ies[u].
 And þanne called I Conscience to kenne me þe soþe:
 'Is þis Iesus þe Iustere', quod I, 'þat Iewes dide to deþe?
 Or is it Piers þe Plowman?'
 (B.XIX.6-11)

'To seken Piers þe Plowman, þat pryde [myzte destruye, [...]]
 And sende me hap and heele til I haue Piers þe Plowman.'
 (B.XX.382, 385)

is not only granted a heavenly reign, he is given rule on earth in the poem, sets the terms of the pilgrimage for Truth, and governs over at least a thousand people from all social classes, including knights. The revolutionary nature of this decision in the fourteenth century is difficult to overstate, a fact that was not lost on its medieval English readership.

Piers Plowman's dynamic energy is palpable, and lines such as “werchyng and wandryng as þe world askep” and its multiple urgent declarations of pilgrimage are calls for its readers to travel. This is, admittedly, not a vocation represented in a single voice: not all of *Piers Plowman's* wanderers are presented positively, Piers subverts what will apparently be a spatial quest, and he is instructed, at the time of his pardon, to “holde hyme at home and erien hise leyes” (B.VII.5). The multidirectional movements involved in the experience of this poem, however, are overwhelming and irresistible, and the historical response testifies to this. This poem, in its several manifestations, circulated within an England whose people were increasingly on the move, and it describes as well as joins this historical mobility.⁶⁰

THE FREEDOM TO MOVE

The freedom to move, physically, from one area of England to another, was not a right for the majority of the English population in the latter half of the fourteenth century,

⁶⁰ Du Boulay has also found that England was tangibly increasing in mobility, and sees the relationship between this motion and certain aspects of this poem. “Right at the poem’s beginning we noticed that those who lived by trade were among the many groups who were always moving about. Though it is impossible to measure, it is hard to avoid the impression that Langland’s England was becoming a very mobile society. [...] Even the poor might go considerable distances in the service of others, or to escape unemployment, a bad local reputation or even an unhappy marriage.” *Ibid.*, 52.

despite and in part because of the increasing mobility in the lower classes after the devastation of England's population during the mid-century plagues. The 1351 Statute of Labourers, briefly mentioned above, is one of our most concrete pieces of historical evidence for this lack of freedom and the upper-class fear of the increasing employment-motivated movements of laborers. This statute was Edward III's attempt not only to freeze wages, but to do so by preventing travel to find better work. Plowmen were mentioned specifically and often the subjects of legal action related to the statute.⁶¹ A later statute restricted movements even further in 1388 (during the latter years of *Piers Plowman's* revision): a decree that "showed a great fear of beggars and vagrants, some of whom were said to join pilgrimages to pursue their begging, and who were anyhow hard to distinguish from men moving about the country looking for work at high wages."⁶² Punishments for moving to a new area to work different land for better wages, or even to be found traveling on roads outside of the land one was supposed to work, could be severe and grotesque.⁶³

Preventing the majority of the population from moving to new locations in England, therefore, was a significant part of the ruling-class agenda. The subject of wandering, as taken up by Langland, was not only literary, artistic, and symbolically rich, but politically dangerous and relevant to the physical experience of many members of his audience—people who must have been, in some cases, trying to travel but violently restricted from doing so. A poem whose protagonist—depicted as an Everyman, inviting

⁶¹ Ibid., 50.

⁶² Ibid., 51.

⁶³ Mark O'Brien, *When Adam Delved and Eve Span*, 17.

personal identification by the reader—freely travels across England for his entire lifetime, and a poem that features vivid calls to quest and engage in pilgrimage while enacting motion through its form, would have spoken powerfully to people on both sides of the regulations against movement. Furthermore, as Kellie Robertson helps us to see, even Langland’s use of the vernacular would have been considered similarly dangerous and revolutionary in certain upper-class circles. In her words:

The Lollard heresy, whose central tenet was arguably the desire for vernacular scripture, led religious conservatives to characterize English as a breeding ground for unrest. The English vernacular was unruly, so they claimed, lacking the restraining rigor of Latin syntax, its conjugative and declensional endings. [...] In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the story of regulating labor is written in the same terms as that of regulating and standardizing English.⁶⁴

Piers Plowman, in addition to being written in the “unruly” vernacular, enacts the kind of irregularity described here on every page, fluctuating in language, pacing, rhythm, meter, perspective, and narrative layers, as described above. Even within the loose “rules” of fourteenth-century Middle English, Langland is famous for his freedom with verb and noun endings. Any accusation against the vernacular should have applied doubly to a text like *Piers Plowman*. The poem’s form, therefore, intentionally or not, worked against the regulation of writing in the vernacular and contributed, along with its subject matter, to the work’s resistance to the regulation of travel.

Documents related to the 1381 revolt that resulted in part from attempts to resist lower-class mobility—as well as from the infamous poll tax of the same year—reveal *Piers Plowman*’s direct influence upon history. The chief of these texts is the Dieulacres Abbey Chronicle (in two versions edited by Walsingham and Knighton), in which *Piers*

⁶⁴ Robertson, *The Laborer’s Two Bodies: Literary and Legal Productions in Britain, 1350-1500*, 3.

Plowman is linked to John Ball and Jack Straw and three explicit allusions are made to the poem: “the invocation to ‘*Peres Plouzman go to his werk,*’ the allusion to *do wel and better*, and the exhortation to *chastise wel Hobbe þe robbere*.”⁶⁵ There is near consensus that these are allusions to *Piers Plowman* in one of its familiar forms. Anne Hudson, explaining her impetus to write another article about a question that has been analyzed for so many years, reminds us that we should be shocked by this: “the quotation of, or even reference to, a Middle English literary text *within a context entirely different from that for which it was originally written* is very rare.”⁶⁶ The shocking nature of these allusions is amplified when we remember that they are not mere references, but emotionally and ideologically charged rallying cries. Piers the Plowman, true to his kaleidoscopic representation within the poem, seems to have become a figure of identification, inspiration, and outrage for many medieval readers—and was used as a tool to promote the violent rebellion. The physical circulation of *Piers Plowman* throughout England, too, was furthered and complicated by allusions and adaptations in these revolutionary pamphlets.⁶⁷ Hudson captures the implications of these allusions for our understanding of the circulation of *Piers Plowman* in the following passage:

If these three allusions were understood by the recipients of the letters, those recipients must have either known the poem very well themselves, or have been taught to understand the references mnemonically by some individuals who did.

⁶⁵ Anne Hudson, “Piers Plowman and the Peasants’ Revolt: A Problem Revisited,” *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* 8 (1994): 87. Hudson, who is one of the latest scholars to address the old question of *Piers Plowman*’s involvement in the “Peasants’ Revolt,” concludes that these are genuine references to the poem: “putting together the testimony of these two chroniclers, I think we must deduce, as earlier critics have done, that it is indeed some form of the poem we know that lies behind these obscure and allusive references.”

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁶⁷ O’Brien, *When Adam Delved and Eve Span*, 17.

What are the implications of this? The first is the speed with which the poem must have circulated. Accepting the conventional date for the A version as the late 1360s, we have twelve or so years for these allusive references to become comprehensible and apparently rallying cries.⁶⁸

The impact of Langland's reactions to this cataclysmic event—and probably to his awareness of his own poem's involvement—are palpable in the different versions of *Piers Plowman*, and it is highly likely that his incredibly prolonged revision process was related to this. It is difficult to imagine the effect of such an awareness, especially considering how little we know about William Langland, but his apparently obsessive revision is more understandable in light of his poem's historical relevance. This is true whether the “inflammatory” B-Text dates from before the Revolt and the C-Text represents his conservative reaction, as has been most commonly understood, or whether Hudson is right that both are reactions and the C-Text is a more meditative response, yet still sympathetic to those involved.⁶⁹

The Revolt of 1381, however quickly it was ended, was arguably the event that most fully embodied and resulted from the increasingly mobile landscape of England in the late fourteenth century, as well as reactionary attempts to resist this mobility. Langland scholarship has revealed *Piers Plowman's* distinction as having true historical impact by being—in its themes and actual lines of poetry—involved in this conflict. At the same time, it was dramatically mobile in form, fluctuating between versions, and physically circulating in the form of manuscripts, loose sheaves of partially complete material, and in revolutionary pamphlets and chronicles. We tend to understand these

⁶⁸ Hudson, “*Piers Plowman* and the Peasants’ Revolt,” 88.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 101.

revolutionary medieval readers as seeing *Piers Plowman* as a pointed social and religious critique, and this is undeniable, but perhaps they saw more than that as well. Their historical response suggests an appreciation for the poem's narrative and formal movement intertwined with these critiques; it may be no coincidence that the leaders who used it as a rallying cry were in part defending the freedom to wander. *Piers Plowman*, on one level, is Langland's poetic expression of movements experienced,⁷⁰ even as it created new ways to experience and appreciate motion—and finally *generated* movement. An understanding of the historical form, circulation, and impact of *Piers Plowman* reveals it to be a mobile and mobilizing force.

LANGLAND AND THE TRAJECTORY OF ROMANCE

Piers Plowman is a work of multidirectional and multilayered movement, then, and its movements contribute to its fragmentation, unknowability, and to the jarring experience of reading the poem. But is this always our experience, and was it the experience of its medieval readers—a feeling of being pulled painfully in multiple directions, characterized by something analogous to Adorno's postmodern aesthetics? This describes an important part of the experience of a reader of *Piers Plowman*, and the above sections have sought to further develop this phenomenon of disjunction where Muscatine's reading, for example, leaves us—but there is more to the story. This chapter, while it is concerned with the fragmentary movement of *Piers Plowman*, shares the

⁷⁰ Muscatine, for example, admits in relation to the poem's shifting, "surrealistic" form that he is "tempted" to see it as "a symptom, too, of Langland's period." Muscatine, "Locus of Action in Medieval Narrative," 120.

conviction with generations of Langland scholars that there is an element of the poem that gives it consistency, coherence—something to hold on to, at least aesthetically or phenomenologically if not necessarily in narrative terms. Looking for this element, scholars have frequently turned to genre or typology, asking if there is something in *Piers Plowman* that resembles or relates to the structures or motifs of other, more coherent works of literature. Elizabeth Salter’s claim that *Piers Plowman* is most interesting as a work of religious art has been widely influential and shared, and for good reason most scholars have turned to other religious and allegorical works of the Middle Ages to look for useful analogues. A small body of scholarship, however, to which this chapter hopes to contribute, has been more concerned with the concept of place in the poem, and the authors of these studies tend to look to chivalric romance and the trajectory of the quest to understand *Piers Plowman*’s narrative structure. By examining a section of the poem (in B.XVII) and through comparison to the romance *Lybeaus Desconus*, the following section attempts to show that the kind of movement typified by romance is a unifying thread that can guide us toward a more nuanced understanding of *Piers Plowman*’s structure and aesthetics.

This romance trajectory to which I refer can be concisely labeled as the “quest,” although it often does not take the form of linear movement—what Tolkien would call “There and Back Again”—as the latter chapters of the study will explore in detail. The three sections of *Piers Plowman* in which this romance movement is most deeply imbedded are Passus V-Passus VI, in which Piers describes and subverts the quest for Truth, Passus XVII, which depicts the passage through a particularly dangerous wood

using the discourse of the “outlaw forest,” and the Prologue. I make no claim that this particular vision of motion unites the entire poem, but only that it is present, that it provides a point of relationship between certain of its disparate parts, that it is one important element of this “kaleidoscopic” work, and that this fact should suggest that the depiction of movement—and space/landscape as a fundamental element of motion—in romance terms extends to this work of literature outside of the romance genre.⁷¹

Stephen H. A. Shepherd enumerates the dangers of such a comparison between *Piers Plowman* and romance while at the same time establishing its plausibility.⁷² He dismisses a number of unnamed studies as consisting of merely “incidental plot-independent details” or “broad generalizations” and cautions that there is no “overt identification” of a romance source in *Piers Plowman*, but sees such studies as elucidating the “manifold-elusive, multi-generic” associative context of *Piers*—the complexity discussed above.⁷³ Shepherd finds Nicole Clifton’s treatment of a romance theme in Langland’s writing to be the most convincing to date at the time he was writing and says of it the following:

Langland’s borrowing here—if one agrees that it is probable—is specific enough to invite his reader’s recognition of a typical motif, yet broad enough in its application to invite an understanding of the motif not just as *typical*, possibly

⁷¹ The use of the term “kaleidoscopic” borrows from Mary Carruthers’ characterization of Langland’s Prologue. “The search for St. Truth is a search for the signs that reveal him—in the Prologue Langland utilizes many possible types of sign, many possible kinds of language, and produces a kaleidoscopic mirror, every piece of which promises clear vision, and none produces it. [...] The leaves of Langland’s universe are not only scattered; they seem to have come from unrelated volumes.” Carruthers, *The Search for St. Truth: A Study in Meaning in Piers Plowman*, 33.

⁷² Stephen H. A. Shepherd, “Langland’s Romances,” in *William Langland’s Piers Plowman: A Book of Essays*, ed. Kathleen M. Hewett-Smith (New York: Routledge, 2001), 69-82.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 70.

even centered on a single identifiable source, but in effect as *typological*, enhancing his meanings by several associations.⁷⁴

The intention of this section is to enact a similarly typological reading of *Piers Plowman* in relation to the “romance-like” depiction of movement. Shepherd has helped to open the door for readings of *Piers Plowman* in relation to romance by establishing connections between the poem and a number of specific romances based on their textual content and their presence in manuscripts that also include *Piers*.⁷⁵ The evidence he has compiled reveals the likelihood that *Piers Plowman* was on some level influenced by romance and vice versa, and that its readers and copiers, at least, are likely to have experienced it in a multi-generic context that included romance.

In a recent article, Nicolette Zeeman establishes a convincing connection between *Piers Plowman* and the two French thirteenth-century Grail romances: the *Queste del saint grail* and the *Perlesvaus*.⁷⁶ She does not consider her work a source study—although she considers it highly probably that Langland was familiar with these works—but instead holds that “the most interesting connections between them are large-structural

⁷⁴ Ibid., 71. The work to which he refers is Nicole Clifton, “The Romance Convention of the Disguised Duel and the Climax of *Piers Plowman*,” *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* 7, no. 1 (1993). In this essay, she discusses the duel between Jesus and Longeus in Passus XVIII of the B-text as reflecting the motif of the romance duel in which the combatants are disguised and eventually yield to one another and reveal themselves in a moment of mutual respect. She makes general claims, but also makes direct comparisons to several romances, including “Malory’s Old French source” and Chrétien’s *Yvain*.

⁷⁵ Shepherd argues that co-presence with *Piers Plowman* in a manuscript is evidence of a reasonably direct connection between the poem and another work based on reception, and he shows that this is the case for nine Middle English romances in five manuscripts. *Lybeaus Desconus*, *Arthur and Merlin*, *Kyng Alisaunder*, *Seege or Batayle of Troy*, *King of Tars*, *Robert of Sicily*, and *Wars of Alexander* all appear with the A-text, and all but the last two probably predate Langland’s poem. *Siege of Jerusalem* appears with the B- and C-texts. He also argues for an “obvious” connection between *Piers* and the *Awntyrs off Arthure* and the *Sowdone of Babylone*, which were composed after *Piers* and directly borrow from it. Shepherd, “Langland’s Romances,” 72-74.

⁷⁶ Nicolette Zeeman, “Tales of Piers and Perceval: *Piers Plowman* and the Grail Romances,” *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* 22 (2008): 199.

analogies.”⁷⁷ The direct comparisons that she draws are from Langland’s “images of jousting, fighting, and castle-taking,” the Good Samaritan, and, more tenuously, the name “Piers” and its relationship to the often-abbreviated “Perceval.”⁷⁸ While the majority of these are convincing and tie in to the present reading, her most relevant contribution is her central argument: that “in the grail romances, as in *Piers Plowman*, theology is given a new urgency by being situated within the enigmatic, questing narratives of *aventure*. In these texts, the discovery of understanding is situated geographically.”⁷⁹ The trajectory of movement towards understanding in *Piers Plowman*, as in romance, is staged as the drama of news being spread across a landscape, traveling uncertainly across space as it does in the “chivalric landscape.”⁸⁰ Zeeman helps us to understand that the meaning of *Piers Plowman*—in this case, epistemological meaning—can only be understood properly in terms of its movement across space, and that, outside of this poem, the closest thing we know to Langland’s landscape is found in romance.

Although the narrative trajectory of the quest is the most significant romance trope in *Piers Plowman*, other individual scenes, rich with allusions to romance, help to elucidate Langland’s experimentation with movement. One of these is Langland’s surprising depiction of the Crucifixion, through which he explores motion in stasis, creating a sense of movement in a narrative where the audience would expect stillness. Especially in religious texts like *Piers Plowman*, representations of Jesus Christ in

⁷⁷ Ibid., 200.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 207, 230.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 200.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 220.

medieval literature function as a unique kind of gauge for a poem’s focus, purpose, and aesthetic: the warrior Christ of the Anglo-Saxon “Dream of the Rood” and the lover Christs of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe spring to mind.⁸¹ In *Piers Plowman*, we see a “jouster Christ”: Christ as knight, specifically a “knyzt and kynges sone” (B.XVIII.76). As he prepares to reclaim the fruit of the tree—the great biblical men who lived before him—from “the fend,” Langland writes: “and þanne sholde Iesus Iuste þe fore bi luggement of armes” (B.XVI.95). A combat narrative follows that could have a place in any fourteenth-century romance; allegorical references are sparse. Langland also clearly places himself in the long Christ-as-warrior tradition in his first depiction of the Crucifixion, which forms a concise conclusion to one of Will’s dreams: “on cros vpon

⁸¹ “The Dream of the Rood,” one of our first poems in English, engages with Anglo-Saxon culture during the process of Christianization through its representation of Christ as warrior. Like Langland, this poet narrates the Crucifixion as an act of heroic battle:

*Geseah ic þa frean mann-cynnes
 efstan elne micle þæt he me wolde on gestigan.
 Þær ic þa ne dorste ofer Dryhtnes word
 bugan oþþe berstan þa ic biþian geseah
 eorðan sceatas. Ealle ic meahte
 feondas gefiellan, hwæðre ic fæste stod.
 Ongierede hine þa geong hælep—þæt wæs God ælmihtig—
 strang and stið-mod;
 gestag he on gealgan heanne,
 modig on manigra gesihþe, þa he wolde mann-cynn liesan.
 Bifode ic þa me se beorn ymbclypte; ne dorste ic hwæðre bugan to eorðan,
 feallan to foldan sceatum, ac ic scolde fæste standan.*

[Then I saw the lord of mankind hasten with stout heart, for he would climb upon me. I dared not bow or break against God’s word when I saw the earth’s surface tremble. I might have felled all foes, but I stood fast. Then the Hero stripped himself—that was God Almighty—strong and stouthearted. He climbed on the high gallows, bold in the sight of many, when he would free mankind. I trembled when the Warrior embraced me, yet I dared not bow to earth, fall to the ground’s surface; but I must stand fast.]

“The Dream of the Rood,” in *Eight Old English Poems*, ed. John C. Pope and R. D. Fulk (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2001), lines 33-43. “The Dream of the Rood,” in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. M. H. Abrams and Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2000), 27.

Caluarie crist took þe bataille / Ayeins deef and þe deuel; destroyed hir boþeres myztes, /
Deide and dee[þ] fordide, and day of nyzt made” (B.XVI.164-66).

Passus XVIII is a noteworthy and extended adaptation of the story of the Crucifixion to contemporary literary conventions, a practice with a long history, but one seldom executed in such an elaborate fashion as Langland manages. As he approaches this event, the literature he turns to is chivalric romance. Langland overlays the entire story with a romance joust and cunningly retains the biblical events while coloring them with the language, aesthetics, and certain narrative elements of this defining episodic feature of romances. The joust in romance is also a narrative of violent and dynamic movement, and this sense of motion is retained here, especially surprising as it relates to Christ’s expected stasis on the cross.

As in romance, the episode begins with the arrival of the jousters, using this genre’s phrasing and vocabulary. It is already complicated and interwoven with biblical narrative, however—in this case the story of Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem: he “comes pricking,” a rapid action frequently used for the knight errant, but does so “barefoot on an Asse bak bootles” (B.XVIII.11). Furthermore, we see that he comes “wiþouten spores oþer spere; spakliche he lokede / As is þe kynde of a knyght þat comeþ to be dubbed, / To geten hym gilte spores [and] galoches ycouped” (B.XVIII.12-14). This Jesus could be Percival or Gareth, or, as will be explored further below, the Fair Unknown—the young man who comes to prove himself and so earn his knightly accouterments. The narrative is complete with a herald for the combatants—“thanne was feiþ in a fenestre and cryde ‘a! *fili david!*’ / As dooþ an heraud of armes whan Auentrous comeþ to Iustes”—a herald

who also answers the dreamer's question: "And who sholde Iuste in Ierusalem?"

(B.XVIII.15-16, 19). This herald provides the description of arms—and, prominently, his means of travel—a catalogue omnipresent in romance:

'This Iesus of his gentries wol Iuste in Piers armes,
In his helm and in his haubergeon, *humana natura*;
That crist be noȝt [y]knowe here for *consummates deus*
In Piers paltok þe Plowman þis prikiere shal ryde,
For no dynt shal hym dere as *in dietate patris*.'
(B.XVIII.22-26)

The allegorical nature of this list of accouterments, too, is not unique to *Piers Plowman*, but characteristic of romance and contemporary chivalric manuals.⁸²

According to Feiþ the herald, Jesus' knightly combatant is the Devil—Christ's manner of jousting is at first the Crucifixion itself, although he confronts this enemy in conventional terms in the later Harrowing of Hell—but there is another adversarial knight in this episode: Longeus, or Longinus. With his arrival, Langland's experimentation with the spatial movement of the romance joust becomes particularly interesting. How does a poet narrate an event in which one man is hanging, immobile, on a cross and another

⁸² Allegorical significance to knightly accouterments is a typical element of romance in the fourteenth and other centuries. Probably the most famous example is found in that alliterative romance contemporary to Langland's later writing, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in which the protagonist's pentangular shield signifies that the knight:

Fyrst he watȝ funden fatleȝ in his fyue wytteȝ,
& efte fayled neuer þe freke in his fyue fyngres
& alle his afyauce vpon folde watȝ in þe fyue woundeȝ
þat Cryst kaȝt on þe croys, as þe crede telleȝ.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, 640-43. The most pertinent example from chivalric manuals comes from the influential late thirteenth-century *Book of Knighthood and Chivalry*. Lull attributes allegorical meaning to all of the knight's accouterments, from the sword "which is made in the semblance of a cross to signify [that] our lord God vanquished in the cross the death of human lineage," to the spurs that signify "diligence and swiftnes," to the misiacorde that "shows a knight that he ought not to trust all in his arms nor his strength but he ought to affirm and trust in God and to join him by right good works and much hope." Ramon Lull, *The Book of Knighthood and Chivalry and the Anonymous Ordene de Chevalerie*, trans. William Caxton (Highland Village, Texas: The Chivalry Bookshelf, 2001), 64-68.

stabs his side as a joust, in which both combatants must rush together? Langland attempts this:

Ac þer cam forþ a knyzt wiþ a kene spere ygrounde [...]
To [lusten wiþ Iesus, þis blynde Iew Longeus].
For alle þei were vnhardy þat houed [þer] or stode
To touchen hym or tasten hym or taken doun of roode,
But þis blynde bachelor baar hym þoruþ þe herte.
The blood sprong doun by þe spere and vnspered [his] eizen.
(B.XVIII.78, 82-86)

Feiþ, commenting upon this joust, frames it in chivalric terms: “kighthood was it neuere / To [bete a body ybounde wiþ any brizt wepene]” (B.XVIII.96-97). Speaking to the Jews, Feiþ calls Longeus “yours champion chiualer, chief knyzt of yow alle,” and calls for them to “þilt hym recreant re[m]yng, riht at Iesus wille” (B.XVIII.99-100). The spatial positioning and movement created by the language of the passage is enigmatic: although the primary narrative elements have not changed—Jesus is still immobile on the cross and Longeus is not—the stabbing is still a “joust,” implying the movement of both combatants; Longeus is imagined as charging Christ with lance lowered, and Jesus is able to force Longeus to “yield himself recreant.” A sense of motion is drawn from expected immobility, underlined when Langland summarizes the event: “Iesus Iustede wel” (B.XVIII.181), using an action verb [iustede] of battle and swift motion.

In this episode, Langland’s creative employment of the language and tropes of romance is explicit, and one of its effects is the unexpected creation of narrative movement. Romance is a genre about movement—the quest, wandering in madness, being adrift in the ocean—and Langland’s allusions to it create a layer of dynamism and adventure. This is true to perhaps an even greater extent as he overlays the spiritual

pursuits that comprise the subject matter of the poem with the spatial trajectory of the quest—related to, but distinct from, pilgrimage.

Passus V includes one of the two passages that evoke the landscape of quest romance much more directly, simultaneously alluding to and subverting the kind of motion we would expect to find in romance, in words spoken by Piers himself. As the well-known quest for Truth is called and the “þousand of men” “blustreden forþ as beestes ouer [baches] and hilles,” Piers the Plowman appears for the first time with the promise that he will tell these men the way to Truth’s “place,” immediately implying a physical location (B.V.510, 514, 539). Piers then describes “þe weye þider,” a long passage that is filled with allegorical place names, but also notably the characteristic features of a quest landscape in romance. The questers are to follow the bank of a “brook,” “fynden a ford,” pass by a “croft”—an enclosed field the trees of which are dangerous enough to warrant the warning: “loke [þow] breke no bowes þere but if it be [þyn] owene”—two mysterious wooden statues, a “bergh” [barrow] the plants surrounding which merit a similar warning, and finally a castle with a drawbridge: “a court, cler as þe sonne” (B.V.566-92).

Of course, there are many clues that this will not be a typically spatial quest: the names of places, included in a passage cited in the above section related to formal movement, clearly imply a spiritual journey, and the conclusion concerns the space inside the human heart: “thow shalt see in þiselve Trupe [sitte] in þine herte” (B.V.606). Still, Piers’ audience, a diverse crowd representing all classes of fourteenth-century English society, understands it as a physical quest, and at the beginning of Passus VI they

complain that ““this were a wikkede wey but whoso hadde a gyde / That [myzte] folwen vs ech foot”” (B.VI.1-2). Piers quickly redirects them and subverts the romance movement, not away from the physical landscape altogether, but to one far less reminiscent of the romance quest: “an half acre to erie by þe heiȝe weye” (B.VI.4). The narrative becomes one of labor and spiritual development as an anti-traveling thread emerges in the poem; the pilgrim who has “walked [wel] wide in weet and in drye” does not know the way to Truth, Piers envisions his plow as his pilgrim’s pikestaff, and when he eventually receives his pardon, as mentioned earlier, Truth councils him to “holde hym at home and erien hise leyes” [plow his land] (B.V.530, VII.5). These lines, which seem to be in conflict with the poem’s dominant portrayal of motion, are a reminder not to oversimplify *Piers Plowman*, to represent it as a kind of polemic, or to even attribute a single, consistent perspective to the entire poem. It is a multi-voiced work in a state of process, occasionally seeming to represent conflicting concerns. Perhaps not all travel is warranted or productive, and perhaps there is a time to “holde [oneself] at home,” these lines suggest—even as they underline the complexity of the author’s concern with the topic of travel.

And yet, the questing movement of the romance is stubbornly present. In response to his request to cultivate his field, a lady voices her practical concern that they should get started if the journey is so long: ““this were a long lettynge”” [delay] (B.VI.7). The framing of this quest corresponds to the role of movement through space in a number of romances; the directions initially given by Piers are reminiscent of the landscape Lancelot is warned he must cross in Chrétien’s twelfth-century *Le Chevalier de la Charette* and its

afterlives in later romances, for example, complete with river crossings, perilous woods, and a destination at a castle.⁸³

The first description of the dreamscape in the Prologue, and the dreamer's passage into this space, is already reminiscent of some of the most memorable descriptions of landscape in romance. In *Sir Orfeo*, a romance that has no established direct relationship with *Piers Plowman* but is exemplary of the fourteenth-century Middle English romance discourse of space and movement that Langland may have been familiar with, a passage appears that is nearly identical to Will's narration at this point. When Orfeo puts on his pilgrim's clothes and enters the land of fairy through a rock—it is notable that the narrator in *Piers* mentions that he is brought to the dream “of fairye”—his passage into a landscape that he will be required to cross is described in the following words:

When he was in þe roche y-go,
Wele þre mile, oþer mo,
He com in-to a fair cuntray,
As briȝt so sonne on somers day,
Smoþe & plain and al grene—
Hille no dale nas þer non y-sene.
Amidde þe lond a castel he siȝe.⁸⁴

In a moment of remarkable similarity to Langland's dreamer, Orfeo disguises himself as a traveler. The journey into the space is also reminiscent of Langland's: it involves long

⁸³ See Chrétien de Troyes, *The Knight of the Cart*. The quest landscape, and the warnings Lancelot receives about it, are particularly prominent in this romance, so much so that his intention to cross it becomes an identifier; those he meets often refer to him as: “you who go to the sword-bridge,” and he identifies himself as “I am he who intends to cross the bridge” (202). Chrétien de Troyes, *The Knight of the Cart*, in *The Complete Romances of Chrétien de Troyes*, ed. David Staines (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 202.

⁸⁴ A. J. Bliss, ed. *Sir Orfeo*, 2nd ed., Early English Texts Society (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), lines 349-55.

travel underground and then the sudden revelation of a marvelous landscape. This travel underground to the lands of fairy, in many romances, is analogous to or symbolic of the journey through the dark tunnel of sleep to the brightness of the dream; in some, this place is even accessed by falling asleep. The only difference between the dreamscapes themselves is that the tower is not on a hill; the order of description, notable features, context, narrative of passage into the place, and the protagonist's visual experiences are remarkably similar, with the greatest difference between the two passages being length of poetic line. This similarity to the spaces and movements of romance is far more striking than any similarities the poem shares with literature in other genres. There is no evidence that Langland was alluding directly to *Sir Orfeo*, but considering its date, popularity, and the associative nature of Langland's writing, it is quite possible that he drew parts of his framework from it, from similar romances, or from the same romance tradition that the author of *Orfeo* had drawn on a few decades earlier.⁸⁵

Another passage that could be taken directly from romance and that depicts a landscape as a space of *aventure* occurs late in the poem, in Passus XVII. In a dream, after Will witnesses a Samaritan help a wounded man in a forest and pursues the rescuer, the Samaritan describes the wood as they pass through it:

For went neuere wye in þis world thoruȝ þat wildernesse
 That he ne was robbed or rifled, rood he þere or yede,
 Saue feiþ and [myselue and] *Spes* [his felawe],
 And þiself now and swiche as suwen oure werkes.
 For [an] Outlaw[e is] in þe wode and vnder bank lotieþ,
 And [may] ech man see, and good mark take
 Who is bihynde and who bifore and who ben on horse;

⁸⁵ *Sir Orfeo* was composed in the late thirteenth to the early fourteenth century; the earliest extant manuscript, the Auchinleck, dates from around 1330.

For he halt hym hardier on horse þan he þat is [on] foote.
(B.XVII.101-7)

This space—the forest plagued by the anti-chivalric outlaw waiting to rob, kill, or otherwise harm travelers—is a recurring feature of romance narratives. In Malory’s fifteenth-century version of this trope, Sir Brunys Sauns Pité is a dangerous outlaw, called “the perelust knyght that now lyvyth,” not because of his strength, but his speed: his is able to flee on his horse faster than any knight can follow—like Langland’s Outlawe who “halt hym hardier on horse þan he þat is [on] foote” (B.XVII.107). Rather than cohering to the proper spatial positioning and movement of the joust, Brunys, like Longeus in Langland’s account of the Crucifixion, breaks these rules of motion and is hence “recreant,” or criminal and unnatural, as well as dangerous. Any version of the story of Sir Brunys, or Bruns, that Langland could possibly have drawn from would have been in Malory’s twelfth-thirteenth century French source, the *Lancelot-Graal Cycle*, the *Post-Vulgate Cycle*, versions of it in other romances, and/or its presence in the discursive context of the romance tradition. This story is present in Volume III of the cycle, *Le Livre de Lancelot del Lac*.⁸⁶ Other examples of permutations of this kind of landscape occur in the early French prose tale *La Fille du Comte de Pontieu*, Bérout’s twelfth-century *Tristan*, the *forest aventureuse* in Chrétien’s *Erec and Enide*, and others.⁸⁷

The association with the discursive context surrounding and comprised by these romances is notable, but a more direct link between the landscape and spatial trajectory

⁸⁶ *The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances: Le Livre de Lancelot del Lac*, vol III (New York: AMS Press, 1969), 194.

⁸⁷ *La Fille du Comte de Pontieu, Nouvelle du XIIIe Siècle* (Paris: H. Champion, 1926), vi. 7. Bérout, *The Romance of Tristan: A Poem of the Twelfth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970). Chrétien, *Erec and Enide*, 50.

of *Piers Plowman* and romance can be made through another work that includes this trope of the outlaw forest as well as the other aspects of the quest discussed above. This fourteenth-century Middle English romance—probably dating after 1350, possibly earlier, and predating the B-text—is *Lybeaus Desconus*, written by Thomas Chestre. It merits a more detailed treatment than the other romances mentioned because of its more direct connection to *Piers Plowman*. Shepherd notes that *Lybeaus* appears with the A-text of *Piers Plowman* in one of its earliest manuscripts, Lincoln’s Inn MS Hale 150, dating from between 1400 and 1425.⁸⁸ Although co-presence in a manuscript does not imply its influence upon Langland himself, Shepherd argues convincingly that it is evidence for a connection based on reception; manuscript connections help us to determine “which romance texts and romance-oriented themes some of Langland’s medieval readers saw fit to associate with *Piers Plowman*.”⁸⁹ It tells us that this romance was present and known in the same context as early versions of *Piers*—it is quite possible that *Lybeaus* was the most popular Middle English Arthurian romance based on its survival in six manuscripts—and that a relationship between the two works is likely.⁹⁰ Although Shepherd does not provide a detailed analysis of these connections and similarities, he argues that the manuscript link is substantive enough that “the door is open for further research,”⁹¹ an invitation that is difficult to resist.

⁸⁸ Shepherd, “Langland’s Romances,” 72.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ For the popularity of *Lybeaus*, see P. J. C. Field, *Malory: Texts and Sources* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1998), 291.

⁹¹ Shepherd, “Langland’s Romances,” 73.

A reading of *Lybeaus Desconus* quickly reveals similarities between its and *Piers Plowman*'s representations of landscape and movement through space. As in other versions of this story, such as Chrétien's *Conte du Graal*, Wolfram's *Parzival*, and Malory's *Tale of Sir Gareth*, *Lybeaus* begins in a forest. This Middle English version is particularly emphatic about the connection between the landscape and Geynleyn's—the protagonist's—identity; his introductory lines include three pieces of information: his name, his father's name, and the place where he was “be-yete.” “hys name was called Geynleyn, / Be-yete he was of Syr Gaweyn, / Be a forest syde.”⁹² Geynleyn, begotten by a forest-side, seems to feel the same compulsion to move across the landscape as Will in *Piers* throughout the romance; any moment that is not a violent encounter or a court scene is narrated with lines such as “anoon wyth-oute dwellynge: / My wyll ys for-to wende,” “Lybeaus þe yonge knyzt, / But rod forþ pas be pas,” “and euer þey ryden west / Jn þat wylde foreste,” and

Lybeauus rod many a myle
 Among aventurus fyle
 Jn Yrland and yn Wales.
 Hyt be-fell yn þe monþ of June,
 Whan þe fenell hangeþ yn toun.⁹³

The narrative of *Lybeaus Desconus*, as with most romances, is consistently of riding as opposed to the walking of Langland's Will, representing a historically privileged and in this case chivalric form of motion, one effect of which is the absence of political force—Geynleyn's right to travel is never in doubt, although it is threatened by dangers. The

⁹² All quotes from *Lybeaus Desconus* are from the Cotton Caligula A.II manuscript. M. Mills, ed., *Lybeaus Desconus*, Early English Text Society (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), lines 7-9.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, lines 245-46, 443-44, 544-45, 1222-26.

multidirectional trajectory and compulsive nature of this motion, however—the unidirectionality of the quest overlaid with the irresistibility of aimless motion—creates an effect analogous to Will’s “*wandrynge*.” The *locus* of this movement is consistently the forest, and in one notable scene in which Geynleyn is arguably in the most danger of his life, this place becomes the outlaw forest—a space of entrapment and violence.

Chestre’s narrator states:

Twelf knyȝtes, all prest
He saw come yn þe forest,
Jn armes cler and bryȝt.
Aldey þey hadde y-rest
And þouȝ yn þat forest
To sle Lybeauus þe knyȝt [...]
And þoȝte to breke hys bones
And felle hym down yn fyȝt.⁹⁴

Geynleyn escapes, but not without “grymly wondes sare.”⁹⁵ As in *Piers Plowman* Passus XVII and the romances mentioned above,⁹⁶ the forest is a place of particular danger—a “nette” in which the wicked can ensnare the virtuous, and an unnatural interruption of the knight’s perpetual movement through the landscape.

The compulsive movement, the importance of the physical landscape, the outlaw forest, and also the panoramic views including field and tower—many of the elements of the involvement of the romance landscape in *Piers*—are all present in *Lybeaus*. This expands the evidence for the presence of these tropes in *Piers Plowman* from discursive similarities to include manuscript evidence of related reception. These associations help

⁹⁴ Ibid., lines 1135-46.

⁹⁵ Ibid., line 1134.

⁹⁶ Ibid., line 1133.

us to understand a connection between a poem and a tradition of literature that are often considered disparate from one another, and also shed light on the representation of movement in *Piers Plowman*. The allusions to the romance quest in *Piers* reveal additional vectors of simultaneous movement in Langland's poem. First, Will's journeying is clearly not linear; he is not always even the focus of the movement. The poem begins and ends with the same quest, the sequence of "steps" do not seem to bring Will along a clearly progressive landscape toward Truth, and his wandering through the landscape is aimless—more for the sake of wandering, spatial movement in itself, than for movement toward a destination. In this first sense, the "mase"-like landscape of *Piers* resembles that of Malory and his primary sources, the Vulgate and Post-Vulgate Cycles: an endless, tangled network of forests, mountains, fields, and wastelands to explore without a linear order. This is subtly invoked in *Lybeaus* as well when, in Arthur's court, he states: "anoon wyth-oute dwellynge: / My wyll ys for-to wende";⁹⁷ no direction is implied in this statement, only the will to travel outside of the space of the court.

Partially because of the employment of the trajectory of the romance quest, *Piers*, for all of its well-documented complexity, leaves a reader with the impression that Truth can be the object of a quest, and that it may be possible for a hero to find it if he travels long and far enough. The narrative of this quest is fragmented and incomplete, but Langland's poem suggests that completion is still a possibility. The link between Truth and perpetual motion throughout *Piers Plowman*, and the labyrinthine trajectory of this journey, however, suggest that there may be no achievement of Truth outside of the

⁹⁷ Ibid., 245.

process of the quest itself, or—more positively—that Truth is only achieved in the process of wandering in search of it. In addition to this effect on the directions of movement in the poem, the association with the romance landscape and the narrative of movement through it pushes the poem beyond a narrative of moral and spiritual development, while at the same time demonstrating that such development is dependent on physical movement through the world's landscape. It ennobles the dreamer by association with the hero of romance, and lends his journey—in dreams and reality—the adventure, danger, wildness, and magic of romance while transferring these connotations from the realm of knightly experience to that of the Everyman. To move closer to understanding *Piers Plowman* it is important to see the ways in which Langland subverts the literary tradition of the romance quest, but it is equally important to observe how he channels, alludes to, and is influenced by romance, and how its vision of movement in particular is a recurring element of the landscape of his poem. *Piers Plowman* is not a poem that rejects romance, but instead embraces it for its narrative power and complicates it in the process. As Will moves through his landscape, the shadows of Orfeo, Erec, Geynleyn, and other wanderers move with him on their own quests in a kaleidoscopic set of images that enrich this profoundly associative poem.

Generations of critics have gone to great lengths to define the ways in which *Piers Plowman* resists definition. I agree with many such efforts, and one of the objectives of this study is to demonstrate this element of the poem: it is multidirectional, multilayered, jarring, surreal, and characterized by chaotic movements. In this sense, it can be usefully

imagined—as I have argued for Chaucer’s House of Rumor—in comparison to Deleuze and Guattari’s “rhizome.” *Piers Plowman* often seems more concerned with mapping imaginative spaces than with signifying, and its interconnected vectors of movement can be seen as “multiplicities, lines, strata and segmentarities, lines of flight and intensities.”⁹⁸ This study has not subscribed to the belief, however, that all we can do to “understand” Langland’s work is to appreciate its unknowability and lack of consistent definition. *Piers Plowman* does have consistent and graspable thematic, formal, and allusive threads; in this sense, it also bears resemblance to the contrasting Deleuzian depiction of a tree or root—an appropriate comparison considering one of the poem’s central images⁹⁹—which “plots a point, fixes an order.”¹⁰⁰ William Elford Rogers describes the tradition of Langland criticism as looking for something that makes the poem “crackle with energy” and lends a sense of relationship to its disparate parts, and this study proposes that its unique poetic expression of motion may be a useful answer to this question.

⁹⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 4-6.

⁹⁹ The prominent vision of the tree that Piers the Plowman tends is also notable for its experimentation with space.

‘It is a ful trie tree’, quod he, ‘trewely to telle.
 Mercy is þe more þerof; þe myddul stok is ruþe;
 The leues bene lele wordes, þe lawe of holy chirche;
 The blosmes beþ buxom speche and benigne lokynge.
 Pascience hatte þe pure tree and [pouere] simple of herte,
 And so þoruȝ god and goode men groweþ þe fruyt Charite.’
 ‘I wolde trauaille’, quod I, ‘þis tree to se twenty hundred myle,
 And to haue my fulle of þat fruyt forsake al oþwe saule[e].
 Lord!’ quod I, ‘if any wight wite whiderout it groweþ?’
 ‘It groweþ in a gardyn’, quod he, ‘þat god made hymselfue
 Amyddes mannes body; þe more is of þat stoke.’”

(B.XVI.4-14)

¹⁰⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 6.

This hypothesis reveals a relationship between not only the poem's distinct narrative parts, but between the elements that can only be seen with a wider or still narrower lens. We see that Langland not only wrote a poem that includes a surprising amount of compulsive narrative movement, but that this is consistent with the multidirectional movements of its composition and revision, and enacted in its poetic form. Allusion to romance further highlights the narrative importance of this theme and taps into the rich aesthetic power of this genre's characteristic trajectories. We see the poem, in a broad but also strikingly specific sense, as mobile and mobilizing: it is a poeticization of the movements of Langland's time, and a contributor to a crisis that was incited, in part, by restrictions of the right to move freely from place to place.

For a reader of *Piers Plowman*, this should show that passages describing Will's wandering across the landscape, or passages into and out of dreams, are not filler lines to take up space between visions of allegorical import. Langland communicates significance in these very narratives of movement, and in formal dramatizations of sudden motion. Finally, this should help us to appreciate Langland's revolutionary aesthetics and turn us away from a didactic understanding of his work; as a poet, he communicated his experiences and meaning through poetic form and imaginative narrative. We are more likely to take this for granted in romance, which is more commonly understood as being written "for entertainment," but Langland is similarly—and more than some writers of romance—purposeful about the effects of his poetic language.

He powerfully communicates through a mobile form consistent with his content and historical moment, and the forces of mobility outside of his control, such as

manuscript circulation and scribal alterations, only contribute to the diegetic mobility of the poem itself. When readers think of *Piers Plowman*, they often evoke the memorable images of the poem—the fair field full of folk, the Tower of Truth, the Barn of Unity, Piers at his plow—in stasis. To do so, however, is to lose the poem; it is parsing it out into separate images that do not naturally exist outside of the poem’s various trajectories and velocities of movement. To appreciate the ways in which Langland was poetically successful and innovative, we should instead imagine the poem’s motion: the sudden jerk as one poetic rhythm becomes another, the passage from one dream to a deeper layer of dreaming, the chaotic flurry of cooks and tavern-goers, and above all the narrator dreaming about labyrinthine travel only to wake and continue walking, again and again, throughout his life—Langland’s enduring image of not only what it means to live, but also to write.

CHAPTER 3 IRRESISTIBLE MOTION IN MIDDLE ENGLISH METRICAL ROMANCE

We have just explored how the unceasing motion of *Piers Plowman* is in part created through sudden formal shifts in pacing, length of line, and diction. What happens, then, when narrative and structural movement is unrelieved, unrelenting, and unchanging? This question directly relates to the critical discourse about Middle English popular romance, and might begin to answer why, in regards to a medieval genre that I argue is characterized more completely by motion than any other, the conversation tends to focus on its rigidity and conventionality—in a sense, its stasis.

The narrative movement of these popular romances can indeed be accurately described as “unrelenting.” Can it be understood, however, like the texts that are the subjects of the previous two chapters, as multidirectional, complex, experimental, and creative of power and significance through rhythmic motion? A broad view of the various movements surrounding and constituting this popular genre is necessary to begin to approach this question. The following pages will briefly explore the circulation and reception of the genre before moving toward examples and examining movement in three specific Middle English romances. The genre, as critics have shown, is characterized by such consistency that these texts—*Emaré*, *Sir Orfeo*, and *Ywain and Gawain*—could have almost been chosen at random from the sixty or so extant English metrical romances.¹ They can perhaps serve as productive examples, however, for their

¹ The exact number varies according to generic definition and catalogue. Carol Fewster and Caroline Strong provide the useful range of “65 or 70” extant Middle English romances, (5 to 10 of which are alliterative) allowing for the indistinct generic boundary. Caroline Strong, “History and Relations of the Tail-Rhyme

differences in date of composition within the fourteenth century, their presence in different miscellanies, and their varied narrative content, structure, and meter. This chapter seeks to demonstrate that movement characterizes these romances, that its complexity may be underappreciated because it is so constant and explicit, and that this motion is often of a certain type: rapid, randomized, convoluted, and linked to the forest as the archetypal romance setting.

Reading or listening to a Middle English popular romance can, in terms of movement, feel like watching coverage of a single athlete running a marathon—hours of the unrelieved, evenly-paced, crossing of ground—and yet it became a wildly popular genre in the fourteenth century. One element of the answer to *why* lies in the interruptions and digressions of *aventure*, another in the characteristic space of romance—the forest—and a third element can be found in the uniquely powerful rhythm created through the poets' manner of narrating this apparently unidirectional and perpetual motion. Although many post-medieval readers have characterized the works in this genre as stylistically and conceptually simplistic, I contend, alongside an increasing group of twenty-first century critics, that something powerful is going on in the poetics of Middle English metrical romance. Specifically, this signifying power is related to its unique narrative movement. In the course of exploring this, this chapter questions the dominant argument that the trajectory of metrical romance is linear, and tries to capture the unique and enduring psychological resonance of the irresistible impulse to move—to ride, walk, run, dance, hunt, wander, travel between worlds, and never “abide”—that guides these stories. The

Strophe in Latin, French, and English,” *PMLA* 22 (1907). Carol Fewster, *Traditionality and Genre in Middle English Romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1987), 6.

central examples explored here, after an examination of the romance quest and the forest, are the convoluted trajectories and frightening irresistibility of motion in *Sir Orfeo*, the centrality of a mobile English context to *Emaré*, and the randomized, compulsive rushing of *Ywain and Gawain*.

**THE GENRE:
AN “AMORPHOUS LITERARY GROUPING” OR “ONE LARGE POEM”?**²

Although Middle English metrical romance has a long history of negative critical reception, several recent works have alerted us to its literary merits and its importance as a popular medieval genre.³ Nicola McDonald, the editor of one of these critical works, describes the scholarly situation (as of 2004) in her self-described “Polemical Introduction” as tenacious “denigration,” and provides a summary of why this might be:

Popular romance is the pulp fiction of medieval England, the ‘principal secular literature of entertainment’ for an enormously diverse audience that endures for over two hundred and fifty years. It is fast-paced and formulaic; it markets itself

² John J. Thompson, "Collecting Middle English Romances and Some Related Book-Production Activities in the Later Middle Ages," in *Romance in Medieval England*, ed. Maldwyn Mills, 17-38 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1991), 19. John Speirs, *Medieval English Poetry: The Non-Chaucerian Tradition* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), 99.

³ Prominent negative estimations of the literary value of romance include A. B. Taylor's, who asserted in 1930 that English romance, in comparison with French romance, “was largely written by poets with far less skill,” the “crudity” of whose works “indicate authors of little culture, though not, of course, uneducated.” A. B. Taylor, *An Introduction to Medieval Romance* (London: Heath Cranton, 1930), 148-50. More recently, W. R. J. Barron's detailed and expansive work has been accurately described by McDonald as “a volume that treats English romance as ultimately derivative and finally second-rate”; yet it “remains the most comprehensive modern analysis of these narratives.” McDonald, “A Polemical Introduction,” 8. W. R. J. Barron, *English Medieval Romance* (London: Longman, 1987). Derek Pearsall is similarly unsympathetic to the aesthetics of the genre, and mystified by the phenomenon of its popularity during the fourteenth century when the poems are “so bad according to almost every criteria of literary value.” Derek Pearsall, “Understanding Middle English Romance,” *Review 2* (1980): 105. Studies in the past decade and a half tend to treat this genre with much more appreciation, however; notable examples include the essays in two recent collections: Nicola McDonald, ed., *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England: Essays in Popular Romance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004) and Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert, eds., *The Spirit of Medieval English Romance* (Harlow, U. K.: Longman, 2000).

unabashedly as genre fiction; it is comparatively cheap and, in performance, ephemeral; it has a sensationalist taste for sex and violence; and it seems content to reproduce the easy certainties of sexist, racist and other bigoted ideologies. But this is not a reason to dismiss it.⁴

Much of the reason for the unpopularity of the metrical romances after the Middle Ages can be traced to form. While the unrhymed, variable poetic line of *Piers Plowman*, at least in places, can be experienced as modern,⁵ the rhyming couplet and tail-rhyme structures of the majority of the works in this genre are alien to modern and postmodern poetic sensibilities. The couplet form is perhaps less alien than the often jingle-like phenomenon of tail-rhyme, but, for example, the two thousand short-line rhyming couplets of *Ywain and Gawain* seem inescapably “premodern” in their aesthetics, and are often experienced as untenably artificial. As McDonald writes, it is “fast-paced and formulaic,” and this chapter, joining the recent studies that highlight the aesthetic virtue of the form of metrical romance, will explore in detail the elements that add up to the impression that romance is “fast-paced.”

Romance was fourteenth-century England’s most popular secular genre.⁶ Piero Boitani, in his commentary upon the medieval English Church’s decision not to ban or censure romance, writes that “romantic literature was so widespread that it would have been impossible to ban it; above all, romances were extremely popular at all social levels,

⁴ Nicola McDonald, “A Polemical Introduction,” 1.

⁵ Elizabeth Salter, *Piers Plowman: An Introduction*, 3.

⁶ Many critical and historical studies attest to this, including McDonald’s and Piero Boitani’s. McDonald, “A Polemical Introduction,” 1. Piero Boitani, *English Medieval Narrative in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*, trans. John Krakover Hall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 36.

among the bourgeoisie, the aristocracy, the Court and even the masses.”⁷ Manuscript studies have also uncovered information relevant to this study about the circulation and reception of romance. Since 1942, scholars have explored the possibility that the famous Auchinleck Manuscript—particularly relevant here because of *Sir Orfeo*—was “mass-produced” and sold in booklets at a particular London bookshop in the middle of the fourteenth century.⁸ As John J. Thompson concludes, such an “enterprise” would have required an interested readership, and strongly suggests that the romances in the manuscript appealed to this readership’s literary tastes.⁹

Such was the popularity of romance in the fourteenth century that writers of other kinds of texts attempted to make them look as much like romances as possible, as a marketing technique. “Despite being associated with chronicle material by some medieval book producers and readers,” Thompson notes, “the opening of at least one version of *Richard* makes a self-conscious and spirited attempt to market itself as ‘romance.’”¹⁰ It is worth wondering whether similar considerations of fourteenth-century literary taste were at work in Langland’s intimate engagement with romance, explored in

⁷ Ibid. Interestingly, he also notes that the Church tended to approach romance “on its own ground” in a kind of competition, through works like *Cursor Mundi*; he argues that, “despite certain excesses,” the Church considered romance’s focus upon courtesy and chivalry admirable and useful. Boitani’s treatment is complementary but differing in emphasis from Nicola McDonald’s argument that romances were seen as “dangerous recreations” and widely distrusted. McDonald, “A Polemical Introduction,” 3.

⁸ This theory was proposed in L. Hibbard Loomis, “The Auchinleck Manuscript and a Possible London Bookshop of 1330-1340,” *PMLA* 57 (1942). It was further explored and adjusted in Derek Pearsall and I. C. Cunningham, “Introduction,” in *The Auchinleck Manuscript: National Library of Scotland, Advocates’ MS 19.2.1*, ed. Derek Pearsall and I. C. Cunningham (London: 1977). Timothy A. Shonk, “A Study of the Auchinleck Manuscript: Bookmen and Book-Making in the Early Fourteenth Century,” *Speculum* 60 (1985).

⁹ Thompson, “Collecting Middle English Romances,” 23.

¹⁰ Ibid.

the previous chapter. Not all religious works embraced the secular genre, but many of them referred to romance as the benchmark of popularity; Elizabeth Williams, who also calls the fourteenth century “the heyday of the Middle English metrical romances,” tells us that “it seems to have been a commonplace in medieval England for writers of religious narrative to promote their product by asserting its superiority over the superficially more exciting attractions of romance.”¹¹ John Ganim argues that “Middle English romance speaks to a larger community, and the narrating voice makes an attempt to include itself and its audience in that world.”¹² This enormous popularity of metrical romance, and the fact that these works “spoke to” so such a wide readership, suggests its significance in relation to literary developments and historical movements in England during the fourteenth century.

Scholars of this genre disagree about whether it comprises a distinct, well-defined category or a loose, “fuzzy” collection of disparate texts. W. R. J. Barron’s comprehensive work attests to multiple traditions of romance in England and its diversity and ubiquity, and notes that “the problem of imposing any sort of meaningful categorization on this diversity is compounded [...] by the lack of any agreed definition of the genre.”¹³ Nevertheless, he provides the count of romances throughout the years in England as “1225-1300: 8 texts, 1300-50: 19; 1350-1400: 36 (excluding the work of

¹¹ Elizabeth Williams, “Hunting the Deer: Some Uses of a Motif-Complex in Middle English Romance and Saint’s Life,” in *Romance in Medieval England*, ed. Maldwyn Mills, Jennifer Fellows, and Carol M. Meale, 187-206. (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1991), 187.

¹² John M. Ganim, *Style and Consciousness in Middle English Narrative* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), 18.

¹³ “There are romances in both the traditions, in verse and in prose, in a few hundred lines and in many thousand, from every area of the country and from every period after the first quarter of the thirteenth century.” Barron, *English Medieval Romance*, 53.

Chaucer and Gower); 1400-1500: 42; after 1500: 11.”¹⁴ This list is taken from the bibliographical data provided by J. B. Severs, the authority of which Barron accepts, as do the majority of critics.¹⁵ John J. Thompson sees romance as so diverse that its categorization is almost only for critical and referential convenience:

Most modern scholars now recognize, of course, that the romance genre in Middle English consists of an amorphous literary grouping, capable of resisting the limiting definitions sometimes imposed on it in efforts to make critical discussion more manageable.¹⁶

The assertion of the diversity of Middle English romance, however, seems to be equaled by the assertions of its unity. Speirs goes so far as to argue that each romance “seems to find its place in a larger whole, a single body of poetry,” and that “to regard the medieval romances as composing one large poem is, then, perhaps the most satisfying way of regarding them.”¹⁷ This is more than a generic connection for Speirs, but a “single pattern” composed by the contribution of each romance, or “fragment,” to a whole.¹⁸ A. B. Taylor recognizes distinct divisions within the genre, but still accepts its generic organization by characteristic theme,¹⁹ while Carol Fewster makes a particularly interesting argument for the unity of romance through its *internal* awareness of itself as a genre:

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ J. Burke Severs, *A Manual of Writings in Middle English, 1050-1500* (New Haven, Connecticut: New Haven, Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1967).

¹⁶ Thompson, “Collecting Middle English Romances,” 91.

¹⁷ Speirs, *Medieval English Poetry: The Non-Chaucerian Tradition*, 99.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Taylor, *An Introduction to Medieval Romance*, 149.

Middle English romance is a highly formulaic and stylized genre [...] Audience invocations and minstrel openings, formulae and doublets, distinctive topoi, couplet or tail-rhyme metre—all these are typical of Middle English romance, and imply the knight-hero and standardized structures which recur in Middle English romance. [...] Romances constantly allude to the romance genre—a very strongly created set of generic signals must be considered in the discussion of any one romance. [...] While there is no one archetypal romance, Middle English romance continually displays a sense that there is an archetypal romance style.²⁰

Romance's diversity and unity are not necessarily exclusive. Maldwyn Mills, for example, argues that because of "variations of individual practice," "already in the medieval period, the Middle English romances could be seen both as a single compendious entity, and [...] as a coalition of smaller, thematically coherent groupings, which may well prove to have more in common with other forms of medieval narrative than with other romance sub-groups."²¹ Although the previous chapter has shown my contention that romance topoi extend across apparently diverse genres, this study is informed by those who see Middle English metrical romance as a useful generic category because of certain characteristic formal and thematic elements. The choice of romances here, although it may seem random, also gives consideration to those who have argued for distinct families within the genre. Ad Putter proposes six "branches within the romance family," and each of the three primary romance subjects of this chapter are from at least one branch: *Sir Orfeo* from those that "are based on, or call themselves, 'Breton Lays,'" *Emaré* from the family of romances that "trace the fortuitous wanderings of

²⁰ Carol Fewster, *Traditionality and Genre in Middle English Romance*, v-vi.

²¹ Maldwyn Mills, "Introduction," in *Romance in Medieval England*, ed. Maldwyn Mills, Jennifer Fellows, and Carol M. Meale, 1-3 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1991), 2.

calumniated, exiled, or abandoned ladies,” and *Ywain and Gawain* from those that “tell of the self-fulfillment of a knight in adventures of love and chivalry.”²²

This chapter engages with two distinct but interrelated elements of romance that can be considered typological, thematic, and structural features—in the simplest possible terms: the quest and the forest. This focus may seem highly traditional, but much has been assumed and oversimplified in critical studies that address these elements, and despite the excellence of certain recent works, surprisingly little attention has been given to the way the space of romance, “the forest” in shorthand, is constituted by and productive of a certain kind of movement—much less the aesthetic import of this type of motion, and the interrelationship between these representations and the fourteenth-century English philosophical and literary milieu.

“FROM HOME TO UNIVERSE, IN QUEST OF BEING”²³

The Middle English popular romance *Lybeaus Desconus* is organized around a kind of “chorus”: “and euer þey ryden west / In þat wylde foreste / To-ward Synadowne.”²⁴ A similarly representative line in the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* runs:

²² “Thus some romances tell of the self-fulfillment of a knight in adventures of love and chivalry (e.g. *Sir Launfal*, *Sir Degaré*, *Sir Perceval of Galles*); some trace the fortuitous wanderings of calumniated, exiled, or abandoned ladies (*Emaré*, *Lay le Freine*, *Le Bone Florence*); others deal with outlaw heroes (*Gamelyn*, *The Gest of Robyn Hode*), or with classical legends (*The Seege of Troy*, *King Alisaunder*); some are based on, or call themselves, ‘Breton lays’ (*Sir Orfeo*, *Lai le Freine*, *Sir Degaré*); while still other romances contain a strong didactic or penitential impulse (*Sir Isumbras*, *Robert of Sicily*, and the first fragment of the *Awntyrs off Arthure*). Subdivisions could easily be multiplied.” Ad Putter, “A Historical Introduction,” in *The Spirit of Medieval English Romance*, ed. Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert (Harlow, U. K.: Longman, 2000), 1.

²³ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 139.

²⁴ *Lybeaus Desconus*, 546.

“launcelot is Redy for to Ride / And on his way he went forth Right.”²⁵ In his eponymous romance, we hear: “forth wente Sire Degarre / þurh mani a diuerse cuntre; / Euer more he rod west.”²⁶ The poet of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* narrates his hero’s movement in sparkling alliterative verse:

He sperred þe sted with þe spureȝ, & sprong on his way	
So stif þat þe ston-fyr stroke out þer-after; [...]	[sparks struck from flint]
Now rideȝ þis renk þurȝ þe ryalme of Logres,	[man]
Sir Gauan, on Godeȝ halue, þaȝ hym no gomen þoȝt;	[game]
Oft leudleȝ alone he lengeȝ on nyȝteȝ,	[companionless]
þer he fonde noȝt hym byfore þe fare þat he liked,—	
Hade he no fere bot his fole bi frytheȝ & douneȝ,	[companion, forests]
Ne no gome bot God bi gate wyth to karp,	[man, speak]
Til þat he neȝed ful n[e]lghe in to þe Norþe Waleȝ. ²⁷	[approached]

Gawain, his horse’s hooves striking sparks, rides through forests and downs—friendless except for his horse—like Geynleyn and Degaré, always into the west. A cursory paging through almost any Middle English romance reveals similar passages: knights—and ladies, like Lunet and other women in *Ywain and Gawain*²⁸—are driven to ride great

²⁵ J. Douglas Bruce, ed., *Le Morte Arthur: A Romance in Stanzas of Eight Lines*, 2nd ed, Early English Text Society (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), lines 568-69.

²⁶ Gustav, Schleich, ed., *Sire Degarre* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter’s Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1929), lines 990-92.

²⁷ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 670-71, 91-97.

²⁸ Multiple women engage in journeys that parallel the knights’ in this romance. For example, one of the daughters of a deceased “grete lord of þe land” becomes the protagonist of a quest:

And forth sho went on hir vayage.
 Day ne nyght wald sho noght spare;
 Thurgh al þe land fast gan sho fare,
 Thurgh castel and thurgh ilka toun
 To seke þe knight with þe lyown.

B. Albert Friedman and Norman T. Harrington, eds., *Ywain and Gawain*, Early English Text Society (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), lines 2800-2804. Helen Cooper colorfully writes that “English romance heroines are notably feisty,” citing Spenser’s later work, in which “St. George has to be rescued

distances without rest, often in a single direction, typically westward but always away from the home space of the court.

Two important, recent books that engage with the quest are Helen Cooper's *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare* (2004) and Norris J. Lacy's edited collection *The Grail, the Quest, and the World of Arthur* (2008). Cooper captures the important fact that "the quest provides both the subject of a work and its shape, and to discuss quests is to discuss the point where form and content meet."²⁹ She also notes, in relation to this narrative structure, that "English romance favored conciseness much more than French or Italian or Spanish," and she provides a particularly nuanced treatment of the "linearity" of the quest:

A quest romance is essentially linear, following the line taken by the protagonist's journeyings. The 'plot' will consist largely of a series of adventures encountered along the way: adventures that are usually in some way related to the final object of the quest itself. A journey, however, allows for the easy addition of further adventures, for extra stopovers or digressions or diversions, and later redactors were fully alert to the possibilities of adding extra episodes to a popular original. [...] The start and finish of such works are therefore locked together, and the episodes that link the two, although they may appear random, are likely to follow some pattern of interconnection or symmetry unique to that particular quest.³⁰

In Cooper's assessment, the beginning and ending of a quest are fixed, and, although she allows for a subtle difference in the longer "interlaced" romances,³¹ the appearance of

from distress rather more often than his damsel, and she often helps in the rescue." Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 46.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 46-47.

³¹ "In the longer romances, and especially in the interlaced romances that follow the adventures of more than one protagonist, the deferral of ending becomes part of the point, as in a soap opera: delay is in itself a promise of continuing pleasure." Ibid., 46.

haphazardness in the intervening adventures is “something more than random” because of its destination.³² For the role of the quest in romance, she offers the compelling term “impulse” as well as structure, and suggests that a quest does not require physical movement: *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Knight’s Tale*, for example, can be considered quests because they “contain a sense of seeking, of strenuous mental and emotional aspiration, such as offers a parallel to the journeyings of the knight-errant.”³³ This assertion, along with her useful taxonomy of eight different types of quests in romance,³⁴ testifies to the breadth of her analysis of the quest and its influence. Although this study is focused specifically upon the physical movement that constitutes the quest, the expansiveness of Cooper’s argument reminds us of the possibility that this trope may be the single dominant structural and impulsive force in romance.

Lacy begins his recent collection with an assertion of the pivotal role of the quest in romance, and—importantly for this study—briefly points toward the potential for the quest to “create space”:

To suggest that the quest was a pervasive theme in Arthurian (and other) literature of the Middle Ages seriously understates the matter. Quests and adventures are the very essence of romance. Moreover, multiple adventures occur frequently in the course of a quest, almost as if the quest has as one of its purposes to provide the very narrative space within which adventures can occur, often at great length and in extended sequences.³⁵

³² Ibid., 47.

³³ Ibid., 48.

³⁴ Ibid., 45-105.

³⁵ Norris J. Lacy, “Foreward,” in *The Grail, the Quest, and the World of Arthur*, ed. Norris J. Lacy, Arthurian Studies (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008), xv.

The quest, for Lacy, is “a highly structured and conventionalized process,” and the quest for the Holy Grail is the quintessential example.³⁶ It is no accident, however, that the Grail has no place in this chapter about Middle English metrical romance. The English before Malory, it seems, had little use for or interest in the “Quest for the Holy Grail.” As Phillip C. Boardman demonstrates, the Grail exists in Middle English texts, but never in the context of a quest; the Grail is even, remarkably, removed from the Middle English *Sir Percyvell of Gales*.³⁷ Boardman attributes this to an English preference for “testing” over “questing”—a distinction in which questing implies a metaphysical trajectory—as well as an English distaste for the “Boy Scout” hero of the Grail Quest, Sir Galahad.³⁸ This lack of the Grail in fourteenth-century Middle English romance also points toward something else: a preference for earthly rather than celestial movements—for the horizontal more than the vertical—for the physical over the metaphysical. In Malory’s fifteenth-century romance, the subject of my final chapter, allegorical movement arrives with the Grail Quest (following the Vulgate Cycle); in the fourteenth-century popular romances, this aspect of the tradition is ignored, and physical movements dominate.

³⁶ Ibid.; Norris J. Lacy, “Introduction: Arthur and/or the Grail,” *ibid.* 1-12.

³⁷ “To be sure, the Grail itself is well represented in Middle English. Henry Lovelich’s *History of the Holy Grail* and the alliterative *Joseph of Arimathie*, along with early printed versions of *Joseph* in prose—all these survive.” “Surprisingly, given the power of this story to generate romances and continuations on the continent, there is only one Middle English Perceval romance, *Sir Percyvell of Gales*. And *Sir Percyvell*, amazingly, manages to bring Percyvell to marriage, kingship and a reunion with his living mother—all without the Grail!” Phillip C. Boardman, “Grail and Quest in the Medieval English World of Arthur,” 126, 133.

³⁸ “The English romances, in this respect, prefer testing to questing. Only the Victorians among the English warmed to Galahad, the model gentleman or Boy Scout. Modern writers and audiences have found Galahad too self-righteously ‘finished’ to continue as a hero for the Grail Quests confronting the twentieth century and beyond, and they have turned back to Perceval as a more companionable modern searcher. Just so, English medieval audiences found in Sir Gawain an attractive and precarious presence of courtesy tested and prowess challenged. And Gawain had the additional virtue of not being permitted a vision of the Grail.” *Ibid.*, 140

The quest has captured the imagination of (post)modern as well as medieval writers—especially those interested in the interrelationship of the subject and space. Gaston Bachelard, who, like Henri Lefebvre, was not immune to the draw of medieval stories, explores the trajectory of the quest in his *The Poetics of Space*, from which this section’s title is borrowed. For Bachelard, the quest—or a vector analogous to it, since he rarely uses the term himself—is part of the fundamental “pattern of existence,” which is controlled by the “experience of outside and inside.”³⁹ Later, he complicates this simple binary by memorably calling space “the horrible inside-outside,” a dialectical image that captures the interplay of the two modes of experience and the paradoxical, multidirectional mental movement involved in “being in space.”⁴⁰ In an analogy oddly reminiscent of *Emaré* and other romances of exile, he refers to Jean-Paul Sartre’s exploration of Richard Hughes’s *A High Wind in Jamaica*. In this story, Emily, a girl who had been “playing houses in a nook right in the bows,” decided to leave her corner and wander around the entire ship, when “it suddenly flashed into her mind that she was *she*.”⁴¹ Bachelard sees this as a profound expression of our own experience: when we leave our corner, or home space where we have been “playing house,” we gain a new awareness of our being. “The child,” he writes, has just discovered that she is *herself*, in an explosion toward the outside.”⁴² Bachelard continues to trace this trajectory as more than a fictional motif; in a book obsessed with corners, shells, and other hiding places,

³⁹ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 138.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 139.

moving “from home to universe, in quest of being,” is an essential movement that defines our existence.⁴³

A similar awareness and preoccupation within the Middle English romance tradition seems to exist, and may account at least in part for the overwhelming prevalence of the quest in this genre. Often the romance narrative is of a knight discovering full existence through this act of *going*. Indeed, in Middle English romance there is a strong impression that *to be*, it is necessary *to move*, one result of which is that “being” is more like “becoming,” a process that is never statically complete but always in motion. This creation of the subject through the trajectory of the quest, however, is only part of the story, and the quest’s significance is more wide-ranging and difficult to pin down. Yes, movement through space generates subjects, but this motion also generates the space itself. The more complex and interlacing the quests, the more pronounced this is—and it is therefore powerfully present in Malory’s *Morte Darthur*, as will be explored in detail in the fourth chapter. A tangled network created through multiple trajectories and interruptions appears in the Middle English popular romances as well, however, complicating their apparent linearity.

Is this predominately linear trajectory—supported by Helen Cooper and reminiscent of Bachelard—the most accurate way to describe the movement of romance? Is the protagonist, in other words, set on a track that stretches from the court to his or her eventual victory and self-realization? Are the “wood” wanderings of Orfeo and Ywain through the forest no more than digressions, allowed for within this larger schema

⁴³ Ibid.

without altering its significance? Or do the aimless wanderings and interruptions take on more meaning than has previously been allowed for, recalling Benjaminian wandering or a Deleuzian network? Scholarship on the quest provides insight into the fact that romance is driven by movement, as “structure and impulse,”⁴⁴ but it leaves questions about those movements that seem to resist the quest’s linear structure. Henri Lefebvre reminds us that motion is a kind of writing, “scrawling” upon the landscape and creating space;⁴⁵ like the knights and ladies of medieval romance, then, we must enter the forest to seek a more complete understanding of the movement that fuels and constitutes this genre.

“A FAIRE FOREST SONE I FAND”:⁴⁶ THE SPACE OF ROMANCE

Although Cooper elegantly claims that “the most characteristic setting for a quest romance is most simply described as *somewhere else*,”⁴⁷ I argue that it is most simply described as *the forest*. The value that Cooper’s formulation brings to the table is that it emphasizes the distance of the *aventure* of romance from the home space in the story and from the audience, usually in time as well as location. “Somewhere else” also, of course, allows for the many oceans, battlefields, downs, mountains, and castles that are not forests and that are clearly constitutive of romance space. The forest, however, is something special in romance, and these other spaces can be understood productively as

⁴⁴ Cooper, *The English Romance in Time*, 48.

⁴⁵ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 117-18.

⁴⁶ *Ywain and Gawain*, line 238.

⁴⁷ Cooper, *The English Romance in Time*, 71.

variations upon the forest; this section will seek to explore why, by attempting to first answer the question: what is the romance forest?

Since at least the middle of the last century, the dominant argument of literary critics studying the forest of medieval romance has been the following: by the twelfth century when the romance emerged as a genre with its ubiquitous, boundless forest setting, the woods of England were already largely deforested. The romances, therefore, according to this reading, look back to a legendary past and are notably divorced from historical reality. Vito Fumagalli, in his *Landscapes of Fear*, is one of these scholars, and he relates this separation from reality to the forest's specific representation in literature. He argues that the forest is consistently represented as a space of horror and mystery, and that this relates to the people of the Middle Ages having lost their familiarity with the forest—it has become an unknown space of fear.⁴⁸ Although we might expect that this would lessen as time passed, considering the threatening landscapes of Old English literature, Fumagalli argues the opposite: hat over time, as familiarity with the forest decreased, its representation as a landscape of horror increased.⁴⁹ Derek Pearsall and

⁴⁸ Fumagalli uses lines from an earlier medieval Italian poem to exemplify this representation, translated here:

From Godfrey's camp a grove a little way,
Amid the valleys deep, grows out of sight,
Thick with old trees, whose horrid arms display,
An ugly shade, like everlasting night [...]
Nor traveller nor pilgrim there to enter
(So awful seems that forest old) dare venture.

Torquato Tasso, *Gerusalemme liberate*, trans. Edward Fairfax, Canto XIII, lines 9-11, 23-24, in Vito Fumagalli, *Landscapes of Fear: Perceptions of Nature and the City in the Middle Ages*, trans. Shayne Mitchell (Cambridge, U. K.; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Polity Press; Blackwell, 1994), 1, 13.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

Elizabeth Salter, in their oft-cited work *Landscapes and Seasons of the Medieval World*, make a related argument that contributes to this trend, and focus on the forest's role as a symbolic trope notably separate from historical reality.⁵⁰

This important and still-influential perspective has been subtly changing in recent years, due to the fascinating work of historians, cultural geographers, and literary critics like Corinne Saunders. In her book *The Forest of Medieval Romance: Avernus, Broceliande, Arden*, she makes an intervention by seeking to complicate this previously held line of argumentation. Her work is vast in scope, and touches on the forest from its classical roots to its role in medieval history to its representation in a variety of medieval texts. She, and others, remind us that although it is true that much deforestation has happened in England and the rest of Europe by the fifteenth century, vast forests still existed.⁵¹ Approximately fifteen percent of the landscape of England in the fourteenth

⁵⁰ "Classical landscape passes down to the Middle Ages in stylized and denuded form in Carolingian and Byzantine manuscripts, and in the rhetorical elaboration of the *locus amoenus* in the Latin schools. There was little interest in observation of the natural world of reality, or in development of new motifs of landscape portrayal. The eye was turned from the illusory shadows of the outer to the pressing concerns of the inner world." Derek Albert Pearsall and Elizabeth Salter, *Landscapes and Seasons of the Medieval World* (London: Elek, 1973), 25.

⁵¹ "Forest, in the sense of woodland," Saunders writes, "dominated medieval Europe." Later, she suggests that "a densely wooded landscape must have possessed a quality of menace and encroachment, standing in firm opposition to the values of the city or castle. Neglected land was quickly reclaimed by the forest. At the same time, the great and unknown expanses of forest which did form a part of medieval reality were themselves strangely populous and mixed landscapes." Corinne J. Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance: Avernus, Broceliande, Arden* (Cambridge; Rochester, New York: D. S. Brewer, 1993), 2-3. Historical geographer Leonard Cantor also testifies to the prevalence of forests in England during this period. "As we have seen, England during the Middle Ages was relatively well wooded. Virtually every manor possessed woodland, which was in common use by manorial tenants for collecting dead wood and grazing animals, and 'outwoods', woodland usually reserved for the landlord's use, were also quite common. In addition, substantial areas of woodland were devoted to hunting. [...] There were essentially four major hunting grounds, the *forest*, *chase*, *park*, and *warren*. The *forest* was a large tract of country belonging to the Crown and subject to the forest law; the *chase* was, in effect, a private 'forest' which a few great nobles and ecclesiastical lords were allowed to create on their estates; the *park* was a securely enclosed area, relatively small in extent, and part of the demesne land of the lords of the manor; and the *warren* was essentially a game park filled with animals, principally hare and rabbits." Leonard Cantor,

century was wooded (although small percentages of this land was also scrubland and swampland).⁵² Small groves of trees were everywhere; because of medieval agricultural techniques, even land that was generally covered with fields was dotted with trees, rows of trees to separate fields, and groves. A huge percentage of forested land, however, was comprised by the “great forests” of the Middle Ages, such as the Forest of Dean, Sherwood Forest, and the “wild” Wirral of northern Wales.⁵³ Leonard Cantor provides an evocative description of the experience of trying to travel through a medieval English forest:

The woodland cover of the medieval forest must have presented a relatively impenetrable aspect as rides seem to have been absent or uncommon until the post-medieval period. However, there were probably impermanent tracks wending their way through the forest.⁵⁴

One can hear echoes of the wild forest of romance and the narrow, vine-choked paths traversing it, questioning the assumption, so often taken for granted, that the forest of romance had nothing to do with historical reality.

Saunders points out that these forests were mixed landscapes, in large part because of the practice of *assarting*, or creating clearings for agricultural activity and

“Forests, Chases, Parks, and Warrens,” in *The English Medieval Landscape*, ed. Leonard Cantor, 56-85 (London: Croom Helm, 1982), 56.

⁵² Ibid., 68-83. Nellie Neilson, “The Forests,” in *The English Government at Work, 1327-1336*, ed. James F. Willard and W. A. Morris (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Medieval Academy of America, 1940), map v. Margaret Bazeley, “The Extent of the English Forest in the Thirteenth Century,” in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* (1921), 165.

⁵³ Cantor, “Forests, Chases, Parks, and Warrens,” 68.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 62.

human dwellings.⁵⁵ Forests were extremely important sources of revenue, providing resources such as timber, wild honey, and, most of all, a suitable environment for pigs. Pig-farming was so important to the role of the forests that the Domesday Book amusingly reveals that the sizes of various forests were recorded as a certain number of pigs: the number of pigs that could be supported within its bounds.⁵⁶ While these assarts, or clearings, would have been familiar, peopled places to the average traveler, there were still enormous areas of the forest that were dense and infrequently traveled. These were often homes to individual and sometimes large groups of outlaws—those who had had their legal rights revoked and who had no choice but to flee into enclosed spaces where they could not easily be rooted out. The association of the forests with lawlessness, unexplored density, fear, and danger, therefore—as in the “outlaw forest” trope discussed in Chapter Two in relation to *Piers Plowman* and *Lybeaus Desconus*—has some grounding in historical reality. And, while around fifteen percent of England was forested, this number was significantly higher on the continent. In short, the historical reality of the forest was marked by peopled clearings, thick and dangerous spaces that were rarely traveled except by outlaws, and a third kind of space that overlapped with the first: the king’s hunting reserves. It was the Norman tradition of creating hunting reserves (forests, chases, and warrens), in fact, that stopped the process of deforestation before it had removed even more of the trees than it did.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 3.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Cantor, “Forests, Chases, Parks, and Warrens.”

The primary focus of most extant scholarship relating to the romance forest, including Saunders', is to establish that the forest is a "recurring literary topos with great symbolic power."⁵⁸ The symbolism, for her, centers on the forest as a space for the exploration, development, and transformation of subjects' identities, consistent with the trajectory described by Bachelard.⁵⁹ She sees the forest as often a place of fear, passion, violence, and transformation for the characters who travel under its branches, but also (as had not been adequately addressed in earlier scholarship) a space for the positive development, life, and joy of a new kind of inhabitant created with the romance: the knight errant.⁶⁰ The forest dominates the narrative arc of romances, providing a space that is both dangerous and joyful for the adventures of this new kind of character that emerged in the twelfth century. This chapter seeks to build on Saunders' argument in terms of historical verisimilitude in the romance forest's representation, as well as to shift the focus of the conversation toward the spatial structure of the forest, its constitution through motion, and the form it gives to the narrative. The romance forest, especially in later, interlacing romances like Malory's and the French *Perceforest* but in other works as well, is a space of illusion and wandering, marked by sudden, random occurrences, *aventures*. It is this spatial representation of the forest, and the complex interlacing of movement and plot that it involves, that creates much of the aesthetic power of the works in question.

⁵⁸ Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance*, x.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, ix.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

Chrétien de Troyes is justifiably considered the most important author in the creation of the romance genre and its forest. He was writing the majority of his works between 1170 and 1190, and his exploration of romance as a genre, his use of multiple, interlacing plots, and his creation of the romance forest set the stage for the English metrical romance. Through these elements he created, arguably for the first time, something that went beyond a setting for stories about Arthur and became “an Arthurian world.”⁶¹ He did this largely through the ubiquitous forest and his representation of the knight errant, a figure to which he greatly contributed. Furthermore, all of his romances, with the possible exception of *Cligès*—which is nonetheless colored by a wooded garden that carries in part the forest’s narrative role—center on the forest as a setting and powerful literary trope. In *Erec and Enide*, he introduces the romance forest with the memorable hunt for the white stag. In this tale, Erec is described with the evocative adjective *anforesté*. Narrating Erec’s entry into the forest, he writes: “*ez vos Erec anforesté*,” translated by Carleton W. Carroll as “now Erec was in the forest.”⁶² The adjectival form of the Anglo-Norman word suggests that “enforested” would capture another aspect of its meaning: the fact that his identity becomes fundamentally related to the forest. *The Knight of the Cart*, the romance of Lancelot, creates what is in some ways the archetypal romance landscape: a great forest dotted with a series of obstacles to a goal (the Sword Bridge, the Underwater Bridge, the illusory lions, and others). His romance of Perceval creates another knight of the forest, one who was raised in the Waste Forest and

⁶¹ David Staines, “Introduction,” in *The Complete Romances of Chrétien de Troyes*, ed. David Staines (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), xxvii.

⁶² Chrétien de Troyes, *Erec and Enide*, ed. and trans. Carleton W. Carroll (New York: Garland, 1987), 3585.

only knows the ways of wilderness living and hunting, rendering him an uncomfortable fit with the values of the court.

But it is in *The Knight with the Lion*, the ancestor of *Yvain and Gawain*, that Chrétien experiments with the space of the forest in the most evocative ways. This narrative is dominated by forested spaces, and is told from the perspective of two knights who follow similar paths: the failed quest of Colegrent (Yvain's cousin) and the quest of Yvain himself. Careful spatial manipulation appears in this work: as the knights come to places of heightened danger, adventure, and suspense, space itself narrows. Both knights arrive at a central, exemplary *locus* in the Forest of Broceliande: "the narrow path full of brambles and dark shadows" [*santier tot droit, / Plain de ronces et d'oscurté*], a turnoff from the main road where space narrows and shadows threaten.⁶³ This space

⁶³ Chrétien de Troyes, *The Knight with the Lion*, in *The Complete Works of Chrétien de Troyes*, ed. and trans. David Staines (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 266. Kristian von Troyes, *Yvain (Der Löwenritter)*, ed. Wendelin Foerster (Halle A. S.: Verlag Von Max Niemeyer, 1926), 768-69. Earlier, Colegrent describes his discovery of this path: "I happened to be riding along in the full armor of a properly attired knight in search of adventures. I turned off the main road to a path on the right, full of thorns and briars, leading through a thick forest. The way was treacherous, but despite the great trouble and inconvenience, I followed the direction of this path. I rode on almost the whole day until I left the Forest of Broceliande." Chrétien de Troyes, *The Knight with the Lion*, 259, 266.

[*Il avint, pres a de set anz,
Que je seus come paisanz
Aloie querant avantures,
Armez de totes armeüres
Si come chevaliers doit ester,
Et trovai un chemin a destre
Parmi une forest espresso.
Mout i ot voie felensesse,
De ronces et d'espines plainne;
A quelqu'enüi, a quelque painne;
Ting cele voie et cel santier.
A bien pres tot le jor antier
M'an alai chevauchant ainsi
Tant que de la forest issi
Et ce fu an Broceliande].*

Kristian von Troyes, *Yvain (Der Löwenritter)*, 175-89.

becomes more than a setting—in some ways, it becomes the focus of Yvain’s adventure itself. When he decides, before the court, that he will go on this quest, he specifically mentions “the narrow wooded path, which he was yearning so desperately to see” [*tant qu’il trovera / L’estroit santier tot boissoneus*].⁶⁴ This forested space is a goal and an adventure in itself. It also hints at the aesthetic power of such threatening spaces: it is a site of Yvain’s desire, and we, as readers, also desire to see it. As Chrétien writes this romance, as Colegrent tells his tale, and as Yvain reframes and retells it, this path becomes imbued with resonances of power, mystery, horror, and adventure. At the same time, it retains an element of historical reality: the movement of the knights from dense forest to peopled clearing to dense forest mirrors the historical form of the forest that it took on through the process of assarting.

The forest undergoes a variety of complex changes in later English romances, but *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is certainly one of the most interesting of these. Written at the very end of the fourteenth century in the northwest midlands, probably in Cheshire, this romance presents a complex and highly literary portrait of this trope and setting. As a variety of scholars have noted, Ordelle Hill most emphatically (and recently), the Gawain-poet introduces a strong element of historical, topographical realism to the romance landscape. Hill goes so far as to argue that specific spaces, such as the castle of Hautdesert, are based on actual, historical places, and that each character in

⁶⁴ Chrétien de Troyes, *The Knight with the Lion*, 265. Kristian von Troyes, *Yvain (Der Löwenritter)*, 698-99.

the poem may be based on an actual historical person.⁶⁵ Other scholars, like Robert W. Barrett in *Against All England*, make convincing arguments that Gawain's journey is easy to trace through the wilderness of the Wirral in Cheshire and north Wales.⁶⁶ This romance, to some extent, reflects historical reality—as well as a generally unidirectional (westward) questing direction—and seems to be an example of a poet framing, through romance tropes, his perceptions of his own experience of landscape.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a narrative dominated by travel and by the process of the narrator's and Gawain's conceptualization of the spaces through which he travels. As Gawain moves through the Wirral, it is envisioned as a space of solitude and combat, of the cold of winter and the protagonist's battle against the elements—a traditional romance landscape. When he finds Hautdesert, it is, on the surface, a space of the court, an alternative court to Arthur's. These initial representations, however, are revealed to be misrecognitions. The Wirral, despite the narrative of lonely wandering among beasts and monsters, seems to be peopled: Gawain has no difficulty finding people who live there of whom he can ask directions. When he comes to Hautdesert, he thinks he has left the forest, but in a very real sense he has only moved deeper into it. The castle is squarely set in a forest context through the narrations of the hunt, and its name (Hautdesert, "high desert" or "wilderness") suggest that he is not out of the woods. In this

⁶⁵ "The Green Chapel, like the Northern Castle, is part of the imaginary landscape created from real places, principally in Wales and the March." "The poet moves seamlessly between the imaginary and the historical, between the natural and the unnatural, and therein lies his genius." She argues for explicit comparisons between the *Gawain*-poet's Arthur and Edward II, Gawain and Young Henry Grosmon, and the Green Knight and Sir Hugh Calveley. She even includes on-site photographs of tentative locations for Hautdesert and the Green Chapel. Ordelle G. Hill, *Looking Westward: Poetry, Landscape, and Politics in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2009), 56, 92, 115.

⁶⁶ Robert W. Barrett, *Against All England: Regional Identity and Cheshire Writing, 1195-1656* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009).

sense, the narrow bed curtains within which the seduction attempts occur are a complex version of Chrétien's "narrow path full of brambles and dark shadows."

The forest is particularly inescapable in fourteenth-century Middle English metrical romance, in which it defines—and is shaped by—space and narrative movement, giving the genre its characteristic aesthetic. In the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, King Arthur and his knights' adventures and "playing" within the "foreste" are frequently narrated.⁶⁷ At one point, when they have entered the forest, the poet tells us, "good space they had" there—for the purpose of their errand to the queen—an evocative phrase.⁶⁸ In *Sir Degaré*, the forest is all-encompassing, and descriptions of "enforested" dwelling and passage make appearances throughout the romance.⁶⁹ In Chapter Two, the prevalent role of the forest in *Lybeaus Desconus* is examined. The wild woods provide the setting and color the story of all Perceval romances (such as *Percyvell of Gales*), and in this chapter we will see the forest's constitutive role in *Sir Orfeo* and *Ywain and Gawain*.

**"WHIDER þOU GOST ICHIL WIþ þE, / & WHIDER Y GO þOU SCHALT WIþ ME":⁷⁰
SIR ORFEO AND THE THREAT OF "GOING"**

In *Sir Orfeo*, movement is terrifying. This work includes one of the most memorable and apparently linear quests in all of romance: Orfeo's journey for three miles

⁶⁷ For example, "the kinge to the foreste is / With knightis hym for to play;" "to the foreste rode these knightis thre." *Le Morte Arthur: A Romance in Stanzas of Eight Lines*, lines 516-17, 532.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, line 518.

⁶⁹ "Amidde þe forest hii abod"; "Child Degarre wente forþ his wai / Thourgh þe forest al þat dai; / No man he ne herd, ne non he sez." *Sire Degarre*, lines 50, 335-37.

⁷⁰ *Sir Orfeo*, 129-30.

under a rock to the land of Fairy, which is simultaneously dim and bright, infernal and paradisiacal. Although Orfeo's trajectory under the earth is the most frequently remembered, to focus on only this quest would be to begin over halfway through the story. In this romance, movement is manifest in loss, infiltration, and capture—and it is nightmarishly unstoppable. It is aimless: the “wood” wanderings of a madman in the forest. It is in the *almost*: the trajectory not quite complete, the apparitions of hunting, dancing, and hawking through the trees, just out of reach. It is also, in the end, wildly joyful. Movement, in *Sir Orfeo*, is irresistible, complex, and inescapably the driving and structuring force of the narrative.

Sir Orfeo is the first of the three Middle English metrical romances that we will examine in detail in part because of its early dates of composition, production, and circulation. There is also an interesting, palpable sense in criticism that it somehow does not belong in the genre—not because of any structural, narrative, or typical generic elements; all of these are consistent with fourteenth-century metrical romance—but because it is too good! A. J. Bliss, for example, seems to be in love with the poem, but not necessarily its genre. He aptly redeems its artistry from a previously unsympathetic reception—which had appreciated “the potency of the magical atmosphere” but not “any particular skill on the part of the author”—but does not do the same for popular romance in general.⁷¹ “Such consummate skill,” he writes, “is scarcely to be found in ME outside

⁷¹ “Critics are unanimous in their praise of *Sir Orfeo*; but its success is usually attributed rather to the potency of the magical atmosphere than to any particular skill on the part of the author. In fact, the poem is an outstanding example of narrative skill, and the author's artistry is such that his technical brilliance may at first sight be mistaken for untutored simplicity.” A. J. Bliss, “Introduction,” *ibid.*, xli. Bliss cites George Kane's reading as a prominent example of the previous opinion. George Kane, *Middle English Literature: A Critical Study of the Romances, the Religious Lyrics, Piers Plowman* (London: Methuen, 1951).

the work of Chaucer and the *Gawain* poet, and is certainly not to be expected in what purports to be a ‘popular’ romance.”⁷² His desire for us not to mistake this poet’s artistry for the “untutored simplicity” of popular romance is perfectly characteristic of the dominant critical reception of the genre, frustrating to its twenty-first-century defenders cited above. I argue, on the contrary, that *Sir Orfeo* is representative of Middle English metrical romance of the fourteenth century, although certainly one of the best, and that many of the other examples, to varying degrees, share in its themes, structure, and narrative power. A. C. Spearing, in a more recent study, has shifted our understanding in this direction by celebrating the poet’s skill in its simplicity, separate from the “clerkly rhetorical training” suggested by previous scholars,⁷³ revealing that we are beginning to understand that *Sir Orfeo* is a remarkable yet representative Middle English metrical romance rather than an anomaly.

A few highlights of the fascinating history of the Auchinleck manuscript, Advocates’ 19.2.1, one of the three in which *Sir Orfeo* appears and the source of its most prominent edition (used here), are all for which this space allows. Fortunately, a handful of details are enough to show that this manuscript was a dynamic force in the circulation of the romance genre in the fourteenth century. *Sir Orfeo* itself is an early romance; although on the surface it seems to bear more resemblance to those of the later fourteenth century than *King Horn* or *Havelok the Dane*, it was composed either in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth centuries, and, as Bliss admits, “clearly belongs to the large

⁷² Bliss, “Introduction,” xlili.

⁷³ A. C. Spearing, “Sir Orfeo: Madness and Gender,” in *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance*, ed. Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert, 258-72 (Harlow, England: Longman, 2000), 261.

group of popular romances composed in the east Midlands in the later thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.”⁷⁴ The “much-mutilated” Auchinleck manuscript itself can be dated precisely to 1330-1340, thanks to a reference to “our 3ong king Edward” in its chronicle material that clearly refers to Edward III.⁷⁵

We also know that this manuscript was produced under multiple influences: the many composers of the works include six scribes and—as mentioned above—its possible mass-production and circulation from a London bookshop in response to public demand for metrical romance.⁷⁶ This glimpse into fourteenth-century literary public demand is highly unusual, and suggestive that the texts in this collection, prominently including *Sir Orfeo*, resonated with enough readers, performers, and audiences to make its production and sale profitable. Finally, in terms of its influence upon the development of Middle English literature, there is tantalizing evidence that the Auchinleck manuscript may have been owned at one time by Geoffrey Chaucer himself.⁷⁷ It may never be possible to prove this, but if it were the case, Chaucer may have had *Sir Orfeo* and other popular romances in front of him as he composed his works—including his own romances—but whether this is accurate or not, the manuscript’s popularity and origin in London render it likely that Chaucer (and Langland) were familiar with it. Ownership of the manuscript aside,

⁷⁴ Bliss, “Introduction,” xx.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, ix-x.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, ix. Loomis, “The Auchinleck Manuscript and a Possible London Bookshop of 1330-1340.” Pearsall and Cunningham, “Introduction.” Shonk, “A Study of the Auchinleck Manuscript.”

⁷⁷ L. H. Loomis built this argument in multiple articles in the middle of the twentieth century. L. Hibbard Loomis, “Chaucer and the Auchinleck MS,” in *Essays and Studies in Honour of Carleton Brown* (1940), “Chaucer and the Breton Lays of the Auchinleck MS,” *SP* xxxviii (1941). Bliss finds her argument “convincing,” if inconclusive. Bliss, “Introduction,” x.

Bliss suggests that it is very likely that Chaucer had read *Sir Orfeo* in the Auchinleck before or during his composition of the *Franklin's Tale* and the *Wife of Bath's Tale*.⁷⁸

We have seen in that other poem of movement, Langland's *Piers Plowman*, how the dreamer's impulsive wandering drives the narrative; this drive is mysterious and part of the deep structure of Langland's poem: most *passi* begin with his sudden "decision" to wander, sometimes for many years, and any moment of stillness immediately launches into further motion. In *Sir Orfeo*, this impulse to "go" is perhaps even more pronounced and constitutive of the work. The first character it afflicts is Heroudis, whose odd, formulaic introduction already suggests physically embodied movement: she is "þe fairest leuedi, for þe nones, / Þat miȝt gon on bodi & bones."⁷⁹ Life, in this revealing romance formula, is the ability "to go on body and bones," and this is exactly what Heroudis will do. From her position sleeping under the "ympe-tre," she is suddenly launched into chaotic motion—in the form of almost seizure-like symptoms and her transportation to the fairy kingdom—the cause of which is, at first, unexplained. The poet skillfully delays the explanation of her sudden "madness," so we are as ignorant of its reason as her husband Orfeo, who experiences it as a terrible transformation from stillness to frantic movement.⁸⁰ Frantic himself, he asks:

⁷⁸ Ibid., xlviii-xlix.

⁷⁹ *Sir Orfeo*, 53-54.

⁸⁰ Spearing compares her behavior to "schizophrenic experience," in her symptoms as well as their cause. To demonstrate the depths of her schizophrenic terror and their relationship to crossing over to "the other world," he quotes R. D. Laing: "the process of entering into *the other* world from this world, and returning to *this* world, is as natural as death and giving birth or being born. But in our present world, that is both so terrified and so unconscious of the other world, it is not surprising that when 'reality', the fabric of the world, bursts, and a person enters the other world, he is completely lost and terrified, and meets only incomprehension in others." Spearing, "Sir Orfeo: Madness and Gender," 256-63.

‘O lef liif, what is te,
Pat ever ʒete hast ben so stille,
& now gredest wonder schille?
Pi bodi, pat was so white y-core,
Wip þine nailes is al to-tore.’⁸¹

Eventually, “lay sche stille ate last,” but even as her thrashing stops, she “gan to wepe swiþe fast.”⁸² When she finally speaks, all the explanation she gives is an expression of love and the poignant line: “—Do þi best, for y mot go.”⁸³

Here the irresistibility of movement explicitly enters the romance, and remains its primary driving force. At this moment, the romance reveals the impulse to go in its purest, starkest form. Despite Orfeo’s frantic pleas, despite the fact that we are given no reason for her impulse and not told *where* she must go or even in what direction, the fact remains: she must go, and there is nothing anyone can do about it. Orfeo and Heroudis’ relationship, through dialogue, is depicted as powerful and loving, and even their love is expressed in terms of movement. In gorgeously alliterative rhyme, Orfeo gives voice to a sentiment still prevalent in our popular culture and deep in human psychology: “‘whider wiltow go, & to wham? / Whider þou gost ichil wiþ þe, / & whider y go þou schalt wiþ me.’ [Where will you go, and to whom? / Wherever you go, I will go with you, / And wherever I go, you will go with me]”⁸⁴ Of course, the reason that she must go—finally

⁸¹ *Sir Orfeo*, 102-6.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 117-18.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 128-30.

revealed—is surprisingly tangible and horrifying: if she doesn't, she will be torn limb from limb, and experience “something worse,” left darkly vague.⁸⁵

The fairies that deliver this ultimatum are motion incarnate. They are a knightly company, “wele-armed al to ri3tes,” who rush wildly around her on horseback—“þai priked o3ain as þai mi3t driue”—led by a king who arrives with equal speed—“also bliue,” who commands her to “wiþ him ride.”⁸⁶ In the speed of the dream, reminiscent of Chaucer's dreamer on the eagle's back, the king takes her on his palfrey and shows her the spaces of the fairy world—“his palays,” “castels & tours,” “riuers, forestes, friþ wiþ flours,” and “his riche stedes”—before returning her to the garden. The fairies' movement is irresistible and threatening in that it does not follow the laws of earthly physics; as Heroudis knows from the beginning, it cannot be stopped. Orfeo's poignant attempt to defend her with knights surrounding the ympe-tre when she returns the next “under-tide” (a mysterious temporal designation that could mean either “morning” or “noon”) is powerless to stop its infiltration. The defensive ring they form should be formidable,

Ac 3ete amidde hem ful ri3t
þe quen was oway y-tvi3t,
Wiþ fairi forþ y-nome
—Men wist neuer wher sche was bicomē.⁸⁷

Later, in their apparitions to Orfeo, who is driven mad by loss and wandering, the fairies are always drawn in motion. He repeatedly sees the king, his fairy knights, and

⁸⁵ Ibid., 170-74.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 136, 141-42, 155.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 191-94.

their fairy hounds wildly hunting through the forest (always “in hot under-tides”), as well as knights and fairy ladies who “com daunceing” among the trees, but they have always rushed past him before he can approach.⁸⁸ Orfeo cannot defend or rescue Heroudis from such wildly free forces through static defensive tactics; he discovers that he can only be with her again by embodying movement himself, by becoming a wanderer in his identity, and by using the fairies’ own trajectory of infiltration against them.

Ironically, he is also subject to the irresistible impulse to move, and mirrors Heroudis’ departure, despite his people being as mystified and nearly as forlorn as he had been. “In-to wildernes ichil te [I will go],” he tells them implacably, and despite their tearful prayers—like his own to Heroudis a few lines earlier—“pat he no schuld nouȝt fram hem go,” he declares that ““it schal be so!””⁸⁹ A reader attentive to the structuring power of movement in romance would know that this is the case, even if the narrative were different; of course the knight must go—how could it be otherwise? The decision to “gon,” “te,” or “wende,” becomes a kind of chorus, and it is another decision to travel (following the fairy ladies and his wife who had been hawking in the forest) that restores the now-unrecognizable Orfeo’s sense of direction: “whider-so þis leuedis ride, / Þe selue way ichil streche / —Of liif no dep̄ me no reche.”⁹⁰ This decision leads to the romance’s most famous narrative of questing, in which, having “gode wil to gon,” he follows them

⁸⁸ Ibid., 281-302.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 212, 225-26.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 340-42.

“in at a roche” and rides “wele þre mile, oþer mo” under the earth to “a fair cuntray.”⁹¹

When he arrives, the fairy king is clearly stunned, asking:

‘what man artow
þat art hider y-comen now? [...]
Y no fond neuer so fole-hardi man
þat hider to ous durst wende.’⁹²

In addition to the formidable three-mile journey underground, the *unheimlich* blend of paradisiacal scenery and the bizarre crowd of dismembered undead he finds there—suggesting an answer to the initial threat against Heroudis—are enough to substantiate the fairy king’s surprise.⁹³ Orfeo’s audacity of movement, his willingness to travel to a place where others will not, mirroring the fairies’ otherworldly movement on another plain, strikes the first blow against Heroudis’ captor.

Even after Orfeo has “his wiif [...] tok bi þe hond / & dede him swiþe [swiftly] out of þat lond” and successfully brought Heroudis back to “his owen cité,” the poem’s dynamism of narrative movement is not finished.⁹⁴ A final moment of stillness emphasizes the poem’s nearly perpetual motion through contrast. As he sits in his castle, unrecognized like Odysseus while the musicians play, for a moment “Orfeo sat stille in þe halle / & herkneþ.”⁹⁵ The racing pace of the narrative has been so constant that these few words are thunderous, and a perfect example of how this poet uses movement to

⁹¹ Ibid., 345-51.

⁹² Ibid., 421-22, 426-27.

⁹³ Ibid., 387-404.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 473-74, 479.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 524-25.

create aesthetic power. This line carves out a moment of suspense before Orfeo's fingers again race across the strings of his harp, heralding his return and—in the happy ending the poet gives to this old myth—rest, at least for the moment.

Sir Orfeo is often taken as a prime example of the linear quest, reminiscent of the Greek and Roman literary journeys to the underworld—such as those of Odysseus, Aeneas, and of course Orpheus—and of the biblical story of Christ's Harrowing of Hell, so popularly evoked in the Middle Ages in part because of its questing overtones. There is clearly a linearity to some of Orfeo's movements and in regards to his goal: he wants to be with his wife again and go home. In addition to this, every episode, however apparently random, seems to put him in a position to get closer to this goal. At the same time, although it is rarely noted, the romance's interaction with the characteristic space of the genre—the forest—and with a particular tree, complicate this apparent linearity, adding loops, folds, and indistinct shapes to the quest trajectory. The trope of the romance forest intersects with *Sir Orfeo* in three primary spaces: the woods of Orfeo's madness, the "ympe-tree," and the space of Orfeo's body. Despite the frequent contention that *Sir Orfeo* is an archetype for the linear quest, attention to the forest reveals that its movement through space and time is convoluted and often directionless or circular.

In line 212, King Orfeo declares: "in-to the wildernes ichil te, / & liue þer euermore / Wiþ wilde bestes in holtes hore."⁹⁶ Unlike Heroudis' parallel "I must go," which has a specific destination at the land of fairy with a stopover at the ympe-tree, Orfeo's destination is vaguely "the wilderness." Although the setting of *Sir Orfeo* is not

⁹⁶ Ibid., 212-14.

as consistently in the forest as in many romances, the forest is prevalent: it begins in an orchard (a kind of controlled forest), and “friths” [forests] are widespread in fairyland; in this middle section of the poem, however, it is all-encompassing:

Purth wode & ouer heþ	
In-to þe wilderness he geþ.	
Noþ he fint þat him is ays,	[comfort]
Bot euer he liueþ in gret malais.	
He þat hadde y-werd þe fowe & griis,	[variegated and gray fur]
& on bed þe purper biis	[fine linen]
—Now on hard heþe he liþ,	
Wiþ leues & gresse he him wriþ.	[wraps]
He þat hadde had castels & tours,	
Riuer, forest, friþ wiþ flours	
—Now, þei it comenci to snewe & frees,	
Pis king mot make his bed in mese. ⁹⁷	[moss]

The contrast between this forest and the “forest” and “friþ wiþ flours” that he “had hadde” in his own kingdom (directly mirroring the fairy king’s realm) is notable; while those spaces were tame and for human use and enjoyment—possibly reminiscent of the historical parks, chases, and warrens in medieval England—this is the untamed and spatially expansive *forest aventureuse*. The reference to fur is another clever artistic contrast: whereas before he had worn rich furs, now he wears nothing but leaves and grass and is surrounded by the furred beasts who come to hear his music.⁹⁸

The direct parallels between this passage and another, older tale of loss and wandering, Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Vita merlini* (*The Life of Merlin*), are difficult to ignore: The following lines appear in this twelfth-century Welsh text in Latin:

Inde novas furias cum tot tantisque querelis

⁹⁷ Ibid., 237-48.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 270-80.

aera complexset cepit furtimque reque-
 et fugit ad silvas nec vult fugiendo videri,
 ingrediturque nemus gaudetque latere sub ornīs
 miraturque feras pascentes gramina saltus.
 Nunc has insequitur, nunc cursu perterit illas.
 Utitur herbarum radicibus, utitur herbis,
 Utitur arboreo fructu morisque rubeti.
 Fit silvester homo quasi silvis deditus esset.
 Inde per estate totam nullique repertus
 Oblitusque sui cognatorumque suorum
 Delituit silvis obductus more ferino.

[Then, when the air was full of these repeated loud complainings, a strange madness came upon him. He crept away and fled to the woods, unwilling that any should see his going. Into the forest he went, glad to lie hidden beneath the ash trees. He watched the wild creatures grazing on the pasture of the glades. Sometimes he would follow them, sometimes pass them in his course. He made use of the roots of plants and of grasses, of fruit from the trees and of the blackberries in the thicket. He became a Man of the Woods, as if dedicated to the woods. So for a whole summer he stayed hidden in the woods, discovered by none, forgetful of himself and of his own, lurking like a wild thing.]⁹⁹

Merlin's famous madness, like Orfeo's, is a poignant response to loss; in Merlin's case, the loss of life he sees around him on a battlefield. The Welsh roots of romance have been well established, and this story is a formative part of the "wild man of the woods" tradition that appears in so many of these stories.¹⁰⁰ The emphasis on frenetic movement in this early version is striking ("novas furias," "fugit," "cursu perterit," "cepit," "reque-
 dit"), as is Merlin's profound identification with the forest in the line: "fit silvester homo quasi silvis deditus esset" [He became a Man of the Woods, as if dedicated to the

⁹⁹ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Life of Merlin*, trans. Basil Clarke (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1973), 72-83.

¹⁰⁰ Philip Boardman, for example, suggests that "the archetypal British Arthurian quest may reside in a work like *Culhwch ac Olwen*, where Arthur's companions, many with special gifts or powers, accomplish a series of nearly impossible tasks with the goal of helping Culhwch win Olwen—a kind of Welsh *Magnificent Seven* or *Mission Impossible*." Boardman, "Grail and Quest in the Medieval English World of Arthur," 136.

woods]. The same can be said of the parallel account in *Sir Orfeo*; Orfeo's flight into the forest and wandering therein are chaotic and compulsive, and he gains the appearance of one who is "dedicated to the woods." The Anglo-Norman and Latin designations, "*anforesté*" and "*silvester homo*," through the connotations of the forest described above, underline the fact that the fundamental identities of these characters are defined by their rapid, randomized, directionless movements through this space.

This time of aimless wandering and chasing after the shadows of dancing and hunting fairy knights and ladies in the forest is not merely an isolated incident or momentary distraction: it colors Orfeo's character and the rest of the story. By the end of the romance, the extent to which Orfeo has become, like Geoffrey's Merlin, a "Man of the Woods," is apparent. After his wandering, he maintains the persona of (and is read as) a poor, wandering minstrel—a long-bearded, moss-and-leaf-covered quasi-wild man. This change seems to penetrate deeper than a mere disguise. I have suggested above that only a true wanderer could outmaneuver the fairies, who are motion incarnate, and Orfeo becomes this through his *ten years* as a walker in the woods.¹⁰¹ When he returns home, he is not only unrecognized, but treated as if he has become a kind of tree-man:

'lo!' þai seyð, 'Swiche a man!
Hou long þe here hongep him opan!
Lo! Hou his berd hongep to his knew!
He is y-clongen al-so a tre!'¹⁰²

Through his wandering in the forest, like Chrétien's Erec, Orfeo has become *anforesté*; like Geoffrey's Merlin, he has become *silvester homo*.

¹⁰¹ *Sir Orfeo*, 492.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 505-8.

In addition to the majority of Orfeo's movement consisting of aimless wandering, the ympe-tre creates a fascinating wrinkle in space. It does so in straightforward narrative, without fanfare. When Heroudis is captured—as when she is first approached by the fairy king—she is sleeping under the ympe-tre, and when, ten years later, Orfeo catches sight of her in the fairy kingdom, she is (still? again?) “[a]slepe vnder an ympe-tre.”¹⁰³ Since one meaning of “ympe-tree” is “orchard tree,” it is *possible* that this is a different tree than the first, but all signs point toward the opposite. The parallelism of the two kingdoms, the dreamlike nature of the passage through the rock, and the specificity of the vocabulary all suggest that this is the same tree. Even the word “ympe-tree,” likely indicating two trees grafted together, increases the probability that this tree exists in both worlds (or neither) and is a point where the two meet—are grafted together. This tree seems to function like a portal or, perhaps more accurately, like the wormholes theorized in modern physics: it folds the fabric of space, and possibly time, in upon itself until two points separate in space come together.¹⁰⁴ This begs the question of whether Heroudis, in the traditional sense, has moved at all, and should make us reconsider the linear understanding of Orfeo's quest. When he goes to the ympe-tre in the fairy realm to take his wife's hand, where in space and time is he, and how does it relate to the home-fairyland-home trajectory?

¹⁰³ Ibid., 407.

¹⁰⁴ Leading twenty-first-century physicist Brian Greene claims that wormholes do exist on the quantum level although those large enough for a human to travel through remain theoretical and massively unlikely, and defines a wormhole as “a new region of space that interfaces with ordinary, familiar space only at its ends—its mouths.” In an admittedly imperfect illustration that purposefully oversimplifies eleven dimensions, he shows an expanse of space imagined as two-dimensional and folded over until two points meet; this space, like all space (as Einstein demonstrated), is of course technically space-time, and so the point of meeting is in both space and time. Brian Greene, *The Fabric of the Cosmos: Space, Time, and the Texture of Reality* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 461-62.

Even in this archetypal quest romance, so influential to subsequent romances, narrative movement is not truly linear, nor is it purely “labyrinthine” in the sense that it is completely composed of twists, turns, dead-ends, and confusion. It is a complex overlay of linearity and randomization, intensely purposeful questing and mad wandering. Suggestions throughout the poem demonstrate that its space, over and through which the characters move, is contorted. This vortex of trajectories, this complexity within apparent linearity, is characteristic and constitutive of the forested space of romance. Related to this, the most poignant and influential topos in *Sir Orfeo* can be shorthanded as: “I must go.” As psychologically powerful today as it must have been in the fourteenth-century, this impulse to wander shapes the space described above: its moments of clarity of purpose give the landscape linearity, and its vague, evocative, and threatening psychological overtones correspond to the directionlessness of wandering in the forest, chasing shadows. This “aimlessness” is explicitly material: *Sir Orfeo* is not the story of aimless characters wandering through a linear romance space, but of space, at moments in the narrative, twisting and folding in upon itself. This conceptualization of space and movement, which also shapes other romances in a variety of forms, complicates the received impression that Middle English metrical romance is aesthetically and structurally simplistic.

“A POPULAR POEM BY A MARKET-PLACE MINSTREL”¹⁰⁵

Sir Orfeo is widely held to be unique (or nearly so) among Middle English metrical romances for its power and artistry; *Emaré* is not. Edith Rickert, for example, its editor for the Early English Text Society, writes that its poet “shows but little originality in any way.”¹⁰⁶ *Emaré*, although it is underappreciated, is indeed not as artful in itself as *Sir Orfeo*, but more representative of the body of fourteenth-century metrical romance. Composed at the end of the century, it is exemplary of many of the genre’s tropes and, since it would be ineffective to study a group of works by looking only at its best or worst anomalies, worth our attention. It includes, too, a few moments of unrecognized flair of its own, including its engagement with the extra-diegetic motion of England’s people and literature.

Early in the twentieth century, when this romance had received very little attention to date—as is still largely true today—Rickert produced a detailed formal analysis of *Emaré* that provides still-relevant and useful information, yet leaves considerable room for application. Her analysis, which, in spite of her concluding comment about the romance that “its simplicity, even baldness, is refreshing; and in a few instances it shows real tenderness,”¹⁰⁷ serves as a list of details that add up to the ham-handedness of an apparently rustic composer, an appraisal that still colors the romance’s criticism in our century. She confidently asserts that “the author was neither courtly nor

¹⁰⁵ Edith Rickert, “Introduction,” in *The Romance of Emaré*, ed. Edith Rickert, The Early English Text Society (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), xxvii.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, xix.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, xlviii.

learned, but was doubtless a wandering minstrel, who sang in the market-place.”¹⁰⁸

Interestingly, however outdated this claim seems, the modern studies that have sought to debunk the minstrel composition of metrical romance have not done so conclusively, and we are left to wonder whether the poem’s internal references to minstrels are reflective of historical fact or part of an artificial generic motif.¹⁰⁹ One of Rickert’s methods of demonstrating this composer’s lack of education is fascinating: she compares his/her (limited) vocabulary with that found in Gower’s and Chaucer’s versions of the story: the *Tale of Constance* and the *Man of Law’s Tale*.¹¹⁰ Not only does she find that this composer’s vocabulary is comparatively limited, “bear[ing] out the popular origin of the poem,”¹¹¹ but she observes notable differences in the choice of adjectives and adverbs in each version:

The difference in the character of the adjectives used is illuminating. Gower’s words are the most colourless, being almost entirely concerned with the moral quality of the thing. Hence, he uses great, glad, false, good, and worthy most frequently, and his nearest approach to the concrete is: bare, bloody, pale, naked (ship). Chaucer shows more appeal to the senses, as in: cold, dry, salt, bitter (figurative), pale, bloody, sheen, dark (figurative); and to the emotions, as in: woful, fatal, wretched, tender, cruel, cursed, weary, etc. In *Emaré*, while most of the adjectives occur repeatedly in all the 6- and 12-line stanza romances, there is rather more sense-appeal than in Chaucer, but much less appeal to the emotions. For example we find: white, blue (meaning dark), gold, azure, bright, sheen, pale,

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., xxviii.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., xxii. For a version of the argument for the artificiality of the trope, see Fewster, *Traditionality and Genre in Middle English Romance*.

¹¹⁰ “The limitations of the author’s vocabulary are best shown by a comparison with Gower’s and Chaucer’s versions of the same story. *Emaré* in 1035 lines uses 802 words; Gower in 1014 lines, 945 words; Chaucer in 1029 lines 1265 words—showing half again as large a vocabulary.” Rickert, “Introduction,” xxii.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

wan, clear, glistening, salt, delicious, cold, silken; but of words appealing immediately to the emotions nothing stronger than: lovesome.¹¹²

This romancer's selection of adjectives testifies to the *physicality*, or materiality of the poem. It is indeed less concerned with introspection than with physical phenomena, a fact that seems damning in Rickert's early analysis, but not so in the context of today's literary criticism. Related to this, and particularly revealing, is Rickert's single line about *Emaré's* use of adjectives: that "words showing speed should be most used"—a fact that she finds "rather curious," but does not explore further.¹¹³ The remarkable liveliness of this once-popular romance, created through the repetition of the adverbs "faste" and "hastyly," the racing speed of the poem's meter, the narrative itself, and its appeal to a mobile audience, creates the phenomenon of motion in the reader or listener and establishes its preoccupation with rapid movement.

The second stanza of *Emaré* consists of an introduction to the task of a wandering minstrel, and an address to the audience:

Menstrelles þat walken fer and wyde,
Her and þer in euery a syde,
 And in mony a dyuerse londe,
Sholde, at her bygynnyng,
Speke of þat ryghtwes kyng
 That made both see and sonde.
Who-so wylle a stounde dwelle,
Of mykylle myrht y may 3ou telle,
 And mornyng þer a-monge;
Of a lady fare and fre,
Her name was called Emare

¹¹² Ibid., xxii-xxiii.

¹¹³ Ibid., xxiii.

As I here syngē in songe.¹¹⁴

These few short lines evoke a rich context of mobility. Not only is the tale to come dominated by travel, but the minstrels mentioned here—a group in which the author includes him or herself—are envisioned as being in a kind of ceaseless movement. The wide-ranging scope of their motion is emphasized three times: they “walken fer and wyde, / Her and þer in euery a syde, / And in mony a dyuerse londe.”¹¹⁵

God, as invoked here, is also specifically the creator of the sea and the earth, the spaces over which the characters of the lay and the minstrels outside of the story travel. Not only are the minstrels and the characters placed in a context of travel, however; the audience, too, is subtly included in this mobility. He or she is speaking to “whoso wyll a stounde dwelle” [Whoever will stay here for a time], suggesting that this is a group of people who are assumed to be on the move, and who are being asked to cease their motion to listen.

The narrative itself consists predominantly of physical movement, and includes at least two related paradoxes: first, strangely joyful descriptions of travel in a dark context, and second, a kind of “static movement.” The first is consistent throughout the romance: descriptions of travel—by seemingly insignificant characters—are drawn out a few lines longer than would be expected. For example, when Emaré’s father the emperor desires to marry her and sends messengers to bring her to him, we are told that

Messengeres dyȝte hem in hye;
Wyth myche myrthe and melodye,
Forth gon þey fare,

¹¹⁴ Edith Rickert, ed., *The Romance of Emaré*, The Early English Text Society (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), lines 13-24.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 13-15.

Both by stretes and by styē.¹¹⁶

A short description, but in a romance of so few words (only 1036 lines), why include these formulaic details about the manner of the messengers' travel—and why “wyth myche myrthe and melodye” in such a disturbing context? Soon after, we are told again:

Messengeres forth þey wente [...]
They wente to þe courte of Rome,
And browȝte þe Popus Bullus sone,
To wedde hys dowȝter dere.¹¹⁷

Emaré's refusal to her father is couched in terms that also relate to the spreading of news by word-bearers, fearing that “þe worde shulde sprynge fer and wyde, / In alle þe worlde on euery syde, / Þe worde shuld be borne.”¹¹⁸ When the king feels remorse, more messengers set out rapidly and return as quickly: “in-to shypys faste gan þey þrynge / [...] A-ȝeyn þey come fulle snelle.”¹¹⁹ True to the space of romance, another messenger “rode hom mony a myle, / By forest and by fryght.”¹²⁰

Nor are messengers the only travelers that seem to have an oddly prominent place in a romance with an ostensibly different subject: the narrator tells us of a merchant who “wente forth yn þat tyde, / Walkynge by þe see syþe” and of many minstrels, who are evoked in the opening, who appear in the form of decorations on the cloth worn by Emaré that makes her seem “non erdyly wyght,” and who are prominently described at

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 193-96.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 235-40.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 256-58.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 304, 309.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 599-600.

celebrations.¹²¹ The minstrels depicted on this cloth that is so central to the romance form a part of its description as being “stuffed wyth ymagerye,” to use the romancer’s evocative phrase that subtly highlights the rich significance of these decorations.¹²² Narratives involving Emaré herself are comparatively diminished in this Middle English metrical version of the story, and almost entirely consist of motion. Emaré, the poet narrates,

Was dryuen wyth wynde and rayn,
Wyth stronge stormes her a-gayn [...]
A-ferd she was to go.
She was so dryuen fro wawe to wawe,
She hyd her hede and lay fulle lowe,
For watyr she was fulle woo.¹²³

These lines begin to suggest a theme of stasis-in-motion, further explored later when “she lay fulle styll” but is nevertheless “dryuen toward Rome.”¹²⁴ Emaré, as the passive French construction of her name(s) implies,¹²⁵ is helpless to resist the movement of the wind and waves, which are the physical manifestations of the poem’s narrative trajectory. The placement of her stillness in the midst of primal chaos dramatically emphasizes the storm’s forceful motion, even as the subtle realism of these lines attempt to produce in the reader or listener the sensation of being tossed from wave to wave.

¹²¹ Ibid., 691-92, 701, 132, 468.

¹²² Ibid., 168.

¹²³ Ibid., 316-24.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 678-79.

¹²⁵ One possible etymology for the name Emaré is the French “*esmarie*,” meaning “afflicted” or “troubled,” and the name she later takes, Egaré, is likely from the French “*esgardée*,” “outcast.” Rickert, “Introduction,” xxix.

In the midst of this description of her storm-tossed state, the poet interjects an allusion to literary authority, not that of a “French book” as is often the case, but with a claim that he is telling the story “as y haue herd menstrelles syng yn sawe.”¹²⁶ Perhaps one of the reasons that Emaré has seemed disappointing to many modern readers as a version of the tale found in several medieval versions is that Emaré’s story may not be the text’s true focus. I contend that what we see in Emaré is a metrical romance about the circulation of stories and other movements—whether true to historical circumstances or imagined. The poet’s unexpected interjections and his odd choices of elaboration can be explained if his or her focus is actually upon the minstrels—those that spread stories—and their travels. The other travelers—messengers and merchants—are of almost equal interest in the text, in addition to, as the romance’s second stanza suggests, a mobile English audience. Although evidence of Emaré’s historical circulation is scant and such an argument must be tentative, traces of England’s increasingly mobile fourteenth-century populace are visible “through the cracks” in this text. Some of the dynamism that the story proper fails to communicate is instead diverted to these glimpses of medieval roads and waterways frequented by people,¹²⁷ many of whom carry stories with them. Such a picture is easy to romanticize, as has been the case to varying degrees in earlier works like J. J. Jusserand’s tantalizing *English Wayfaring Life in the Middle Ages*, but we do know that English people in general were increasingly mobile during Emaré’s composition and circulation, and wandering minstrels who recited romances existed,

¹²⁶ Emaré, 319.

¹²⁷ There are at least fifteen such asides in this short romance: at lines 13, 19, 132, 235, 343, 463, 514, 542, 574, 598, 689, 749, 832, 959, and especially at 193: “Messengeres dyzte hem in hye; / Wyth myche murthe and melodye, / Forth gon þey fare, / Both by stretes and by stye.” Emaré, 193-96.

whether or not they were the composers of the texts they performed (in most cases they were likely not). Ad Putter observes that this romance was written in the north and “found its way south—possibly to a London scriptorium where miscellanies like Cotton Caligula A.ii were produced to meet the demand for books of a growing circle of literate layfolk”,¹²⁸ if this is true, then the poem is a traveler itself, facilitated by human travelers and a part of metrical romance’s rapid circulation. It shares this with *Sir Orfeo*, which narrates in the body of its text how it was composed and found in “Bretayne,” and “forþ y-brouȝt.”¹²⁹ *Emaré* is one example of how Middle English metrical romance in the fourteenth century *claimed* this mobile context, embracing it and revealing an interplay between romance’s focus on travel and the involvement of historical mobility in the increasing circulation and popularity of the genre.

“ÞAN RADE HE FORTH INTO FRITH, AND HYS LYOUN WENT HYM WITH”¹³⁰

In terms of motion, *Ywain and Gawain* is the quintessential fourteenth-century Middle English metrical romance. It was composed during the height of the flourishing of the genre in this period: between 1325 and 1350. Like *Percyvell of Gales*, it is often dismissed as a clumsy English rendition of Chrétien’s twelfth-century original;¹³¹ it is

¹²⁸ Ad Putter, “The Narrative Logic of Emaré,” in *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance*, ed. Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert, 157-80 (Harlow, England: Longman, 2000), 157.

¹²⁹ *Sir Orfeo*, 13-14.

¹³⁰ *Ywain and Gawain*, 2208-9.

¹³¹ Roger Owens is a rare exception to this. He also notes the unfavorable reception of *Ywain and Gawain* because of comparisons to Chrétien’s version, but argues that, in his reading, “the English poet’s use of highly controlled conventional style is seen as an advantage to his expression”; the poet’s embrace of the Middle English romance tradition and rejection of the French provides the poem with “a wealth of

also similar to *Percyvell*, *Lybeaus Desconus*, and others, in its structure and setting: it is comprised of the quests of Arthurian knights, always through the forest adventurous. Its length (more than three times that of *Sir Orfeo* and *Emaré*) accentuates the *persistence* of its narrative and metrical rhythm, including repetition and, notably, the powerful impulse to *go*. Narrated movement is pervasive: in just the first 250 lines, which include more reflection and less travel than many later sections, there are 48 verbs and adverbs that communicate physical motion and speed—a remarkably varied collection of 24 different words, not including each word’s multiple forms.¹³² The words of Gawain to Ywain even form a kind of polemic against stasis, as will be discussed below. In terms of its narrative structure, it is also an excellent example of apparent linearity troubled by other trajectories. This romance, finally, predicts the interlacing movement of knights through the forest in Malory’s work, imagined and put in writing more than a century later.

Shortly after the opening of this romance, there are already subtle hints that the poet is thinking about the subject of movement itself—in this case, the movement of sound through air, as in the lecture of Chaucer’s eagle in *The House of Fame*. The prevalent romance trope of “the word” traveling across the landscape appears in relation

associative meanings” and “internal order.” Roger John Owens, “*Ywain and Gawain: Style in the Middle English Romance*” (University of California, San Diego, 1977), viii.

¹³² The most common verbs in these 250 lines (and the romance) are “*went*” (seven appearances), the related “*seke*,” “*fand*,” and “*layf*” (six), “*take/tane*” (three), “*rade/riden*” (three), and “*led*” (three). The verbs “*past*,” “*go*,” “*yede*,” “*mete*,” “*fare*,” “*drogh*,” “*rise*,” “*fall*,” “*lepe*,” and “*come*” all appear at least once. Adverbs include “*son*” (five appearances), “*fast*,” “*sodainli*,” and “*light*.” Also noteworthy is the verbal phrase “*rope and rare*” to describe the movement of wild beasts in the forest (“*mani a wilde lebard, / Lions, beres, bath bul and bare*,” foreshadowing the lion’s later appearance) and the adverbial phrase for the passage of a story through the body: “*als dose þe wind*.” *Ywain and Gawain*, 1-250.

to the fame of Arthur's knights—"over al þe werld went þe worde."¹³³ Colgrevice, Ywain's cousin, pushes this trope further by exploring the physics of this process in relation to the body. Before formally beginning his "spell" [story], he observes:

But word fares als dose þe wind,
Bot if men it in hert bynd;
And, wordes wo so trewly tase,
By þe eres into þe hert it gase,
And in þe hert þare es þe horde
And knawing of ilk mans worde.¹³⁴

As Langland observes about the soul, here a "worde," specifically a story, is a kind of traveler within the human body. The transition from this evocative personification of the word to Colgrevice's tale, in which for six years he "rade allane [...] / Obout forto seke aventurs,"¹³⁵ is natural, maintaining his, and the romance's, preoccupation with movement through space. His story is conflated with himself—the lone traveler—setting the stage for a tale of movement, and suggesting a parallel between the romance's historical circulation and the mobility of its narrative content.

Ywain and Gawain is rhythmic in a variety of ways, and its pacing is consistently rapid. Most noticeably, it is composed of rhyming couplets (2016 of them) in short, four-stressed lines. The poet's use of formula and repetition, along with a preference for action, combine with the result that the majority of the romance's lines do not lend themselves to long meditation and digestion, but to being experienced in motion as they pass. As in Chrétien's version, but increased in the Middle English, we often see the

¹³³ Ibid., 46.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 143-48.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 154-55.

repetition of entire passages, and, with variation, entire adventures. The “adventure” of the stone slab and the storm becomes a kind of chorus for the romance, providing the reader/listener with a familiar central image—not a comfortable “home-space” in the traditional sense, but a chaos of movement at the beating heart of the poem, described in detail below. In the Middle English version, the adventure of the basin, slab, and storm is first narrated in the future tense by the giant who keeps the beasts of the forest, and then by Colgrevice as he narrates his experience:

I toke þe bacyn sone onane	[basin]
And helt water upon þe stane.	[threw]
þe weder wex þan wonder-blak,	
And þe thoner fast gan crak.	
þare come slike stormes of hayl and rayn,	[such]
Unnethes I might stand þare ongayn;	[with difficulty]
þe store windes blew ful lowd,	[fierce]
So kene come never are of clowd.	
I was drevyn with snaw and slete,	
Unnethes I might stand on my fete;	
In my face þe levening smate,	[lightning]
I wend have brent, so was it hate. ¹³⁶	[hot]

The full description of this violently chaotic adventure, from the casting of the water upon the slab through the storm and the flock of birds to the arrival of the knight, occupies the space of thirty-five lines. When Ywain experiences the same event, however, it has been shortened to seven lines of summary, concluded by “right als þai had done byfor.”¹³⁷ Later, when Arthur arrives at this place and the storm is described yet again, it is still more rapid:

þe king kest water on þe stane;

¹³⁶ Ibid., 367-78.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 628.

þe storme rase ful sone onane
With wikked weders, kene and calde,
Als it was byforehand talde.”¹³⁸

More than two thousand lines later, at the end of the romance, when this storm is rehearsed for the *fifth time*—counting the first description by the giant—it is reduced to a mere three lines with only minor variation: “he kest water upon þe stane: / Þe storm rase ful sone onane, / Þe thoner grisely gan outbrest,” with three amplifying lines that emphasize the storm’s violent interaction with the landscape (“him thought als al þe grete forest / And al þat was about þe well / Sold have sonken into hell.”)¹³⁹

The same is true of the other elements of this adventure—the narrowing path through the forest, the meeting with the giant who watches over the animals, and the angry arrival of the knight—and the pronounced formal effect is *acceleration*. Coupled with the racing, song-like pace of the poem’s rhyming couplets, this episode takes on the form of a chorus. Rather than increasing in intricacy and complexity with each repetition, however, its decreasing length increases the pace of narration, creating the impression that one is rushing through the story at ever-greater speeds. This technique has been frequently considered a product of crude attempts to fit as much story as possible into the romance without wasting lines, but it is consistent with the characters’ compulsive departures and fear of standing still. Whether accidental or designed, the acceleration of pacing—already clipping along from the first line—combines with narrative motion to create a mobile liveliness integrated into all levels of the poem.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 1291-94.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 3841-46.

When Ywain has married Alundyne and he is at risk of staying with her in their castle, Gawain gives him a few words of friendly advice:

‘Sir, if þou ly at hame,
Wonderly men wil þe blame.
Þat knyght es nothing to set by,
Þat leves al his chivalry
And ligges bekeand in his bed,
When he haves a lady wed.’¹⁴⁰

He suggests, instead, that they “wende” together “to haunte armes in ilk cuntre.”¹⁴¹ His advice substantiates the obsessive movement of which the knights, Ywain included, seem to be manifestations. Any threat of idleness in this text is an illusion, and compulsive movement is at least as pronounced as in any other romance. A few examples from dozens serve to demonstrate this. From the first, Colgrevance narrates his riding for six years for no reason but “forto seke aventurs,” and his story is rife with descriptions of travel: “nerehand al day I rade þareyn,” “and þederward ful faste I rade,” “þan toke I leve and went my way, / And rade unto þe midday.”¹⁴² His rest is fleeting and departure is compulsive:

‘Þat night had I fule gude rest
And mi stede esed of þe best.
Alsone als it was dayes lyght,
Forth to fare sone was I dyght.’¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 1455-60.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 1467, 1471.

¹⁴² Ibid., 153, 160, 164, 349-50.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 231-34.

Arthur's proclamations to his knights are often critical moments in romance, and in *Ywain and Gawain* his invitation—"“swith [swiftly],’ he sayd, ‘wendes with me, / Who so wil þat wonder se””—is a call to enervate the entire court to rapid motion.¹⁴⁴

Ywain too, as we are constantly told, “will out ride,” and no formula is more prevalent than “forth þan went Sir Ywayne.”¹⁴⁵ When the challenging knight charges Ywain at the well, he does so “als fast so þe fowl in flyght.”¹⁴⁶ Adjectives and adverbs of speed are more frequent even than in *Emaré*. Movement is not reserved for men only, either, but is a part of universal experience; when Ywain has forgotten his vow, a maiden (emphatically alone) quests to Arthur's court, “hasted hir fast into hall” and takes his ring; in a later, joyful rush we hear that “also þe lady ran ful fast.”¹⁴⁷ About Lunet, we are told, “forth sho went on hir vayage. / Day ne nyght wald sho noight spare; / Thurgh al þe land fast gan sho fare.”¹⁴⁸

The ubiquity of active verbs is striking—even considering generic expectations—but the many refusals to stand still and concerns about stasis are even more revealing. Lunet worries that Ywain “dwelles ful lang here”; after Gawain's advice, “no lenger wald Syr Ywayne byde, / On his stede sone gan he stride”; later, Ywain again “wald no lenger lend [wait], / Bot redies him fast forto wend”; and after one of his short stays he expresses the impulse in words, ““sir,’ he said, ‘now most I wend, / Lenger here dar I

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 527-28.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 572, 585.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 630.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 1596, 2491.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 2800-2802.

noght lende; / Til oþer place byhovos me fare.”¹⁴⁹ The vagueness of this particular line—“it behooves me to go to another place”—suggests that this impulse is a basic need, independent of a specific goal. After defending another castle from a giant, the lord prays that he will “dwel with him a litel stage”; ““sir, þat may I noght do,”” Ywain responds, ““bileves wele, for me bus go.””¹⁵⁰ The inhabitants’ response communicates disappointment, but a palpable sense that they had expected nothing else.¹⁵¹ In another adventure he is almost too late to save Lunet, and her words to him—“wel nere had 3e dwelt over lang”¹⁵²—are richly ironic. Ywain’s declaration: ““worth of me what so bityde, / Manly wil I heþin [hence] wende,””¹⁵³ is an expression of this romance’s driving narrative force.

Unlike in *Sir Orfeo* and *Emaré*, the forest is the *only* space in *Ywain and Gawain*—the location of this irresistible motion. As often happens in romance, descriptions of the trees and other detailed landscape features are absent, but narrations of movement, and of how that movement shapes and is shaped by the space, are predominant. The repeated line “a faire forest sone I fand” often appears immediately after the “I will go forth” statements described above, and precedes whatever adventure will happen next under those trees.¹⁵⁴ After the lion has joined Ywain’s travels, the

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 1095, 1551-52, 1955-56, 2357-59.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 2500, 2503-4.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 2506.

¹⁵² Ibid., 2552.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 924-25.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 237.

rhythmic descriptions of movement that introduce *aventures* gain a unique color, but remain roughly the same, and the lion is implicated in his knightly movement: “þan rade he forth into frith, / And hys lyoun went hym with.”¹⁵⁵ Chrétien’s “narrow path full of brambles and dark shadows” is a presence in the text, rhythmically described as many times as the adventure of the basin to which it leads; the French poet’s experimentation with the narrowing of the forest’s space to signal the beginning of a significant adventure is maintained in this English popular version. Colgrevice narrates:

‘In a frith I fand a street
Ful thik and hard, I 3ow bihete,
With thornes, breres and moni a quyn.
Nerehand al day I rade pareyn,
And thurgh I past with mekyl payn.’¹⁵⁶

This narrow passageway, the *Holzwege* evoked by Lefebvre, is a space that exists to necessitate painful movement. Its spatial constriction and slight suspension of the speed of narration promise some kind of climax.

In one sense, this thorny path introduces linearity to the narrative trajectory. Colgrevice had been riding for many years with the aimless goal of seeking adventures—true to the etymology of knight *errant*—and now he is ineluctably drawn to the adventure of the storm. In another sense, it introduces a circular, looping trajectory to the romance, reminiscent of the *ympe-tre* in *Sir Orfeo*. It seems a passage to another kind of place—the adventures after it are particularly otherworldly—and different knights continue to find it, drawing the reader/listener back through the path again and again.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 2207-8.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 157-61.

Considering the incredible range of the knights' travels—often stretching over many years—it is highly unrealistic that they would all find the same path; its gravity pulls them in nevertheless, and in this way it serves as a unifying narrative force, making the forest at once a very large and a very small world. And yet, what it draws them to is something more complex than the unidirectional quest, but a convoluted network of rushing, randomized motion.

In addition to this “looping,” the forest of *Ywain and Gawain* is a space of interruption. For many of its lines, Ywain has a single objective: like Orfeo, to be with his wife again. In this place, however, too many *aventures* assault him without warning for him to follow a single trajectory—his quest—and his frustration at this is evident. For example, he agrees to defend Gawain's sister's honor, but hopes he can finish the task quickly, agreeing:

‘þat I may venge 3ow on 3owre fa, [foe]
And þat he cum swilk tyme of day,
þat I by tyme may wend my way
Forto do anoþer dede;
For, sertes, þeder most I need.’¹⁵⁷

The fact that Ywain is “in demand” is a source of some chagrin to him, because no matter how quickly he tries to finish each task and move on, he is unable to continue in the direction he desires. In a particularly entertaining touch on the part of the poet, word has spread, and Ywain has become a character reminiscent of nothing more than the modern superhero. As it does in the comic books of the twentieth century, this career begins when he accepts a persona and begins calling himself “the Knight with the Lion.” As one

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 2330-34.

woman seeks after “þe knight with þe lyown” for help, the narrator gives us a taste of the rumors that have begun to circulate about him: “he helps al in word and dede, / Ðat unto him has any need.”¹⁵⁸ In spite of himself, the sudden, persistent, and multidirectional *aventures* of the forest have kept him in that space, not exactly wandering but rushing from task to task, a heroic presence moving through the forest but grounded in no particular *locus* within it. People who need help go to the forest to seek him, but they cannot possibly know where in this labyrinthine space he will be found.

This heroic career begins when Ywain “wex al wilde and wode” and “unto þe wod þe way he nome.”¹⁵⁹ Like Merlin, Orfeo, and the biblical Nebuchadnezzar (well-known to medieval writers and audiences), Ywain becomes bestial by wandering aimlessly in the woods. His madness is also caused by loss, but unlike these predecessors, his loss is caused by his own inability to resist the draw of these interruptive trajectories of the forest. What should have been his linear quest—to return to Alundyne, his wife, within the year—becomes irresistible, randomized wandering. Before this, it has already been foreshadowed that the forest is a space of the uncontained movements of animals. Meeting the monstrous beast-keeper in the woods, Colgrevice marvels:

‘For I herd never of man bot þe
In wilderness ne in forestes,
Ðat kepeing had of wilde bestes,
Bot þai war bunden fast in halde.’¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 2804-6.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 1650-51.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 286-89.

Ywain's movement among the animals is similarly free: "about he welk in þe forest, / Als it wore a wilde beste."¹⁶¹ He walks and runs in random directions, responding to events with haste and violence, and becomes like an animal himself—"I was a man, now am I nane"¹⁶²—putting him in a state in which it becomes possible for a lion to be his traveling companion.

The lion, from the moment he enters the romance—saved from, in the English version, a more sensationalized fire-breathing dragon¹⁶³—is a kind of "free radical," a manifestation of the fiercely irresistible movement that characterizes the poem. The rhythmically persistent theme of the second half of the romance is the failed attempt to make the lion stand still. From the moment he first sees Ywain hurt by a giant, he leaps into the fray—"and to þe geant sone he styrt"—inflicts horrific violence, and is doubly fearsome because "ever he lepis fro his dynt, / So þat no strake upon him lyght."¹⁶⁴ It is the lion's speed, his leaping and lunging in ever-changing directions, that is more dangerous than his strength. In other episodes, Ywain's combatants—who always outnumber him—refuse to fight unless he restrains the lion, which he tries (unsuccessfully) to do:

He bad his lyoun go to rest;
And he laid him sone onane
Doun byfore þam everilkane;
Bitwene his legges he layd his tail
And so beheld to þe batayl.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 163-64.

¹⁶² Ibid., 2116.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 1981-84.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 2466, 2473-74.

As soon as Ywain seems to be losing the battle, however, “No lenger wald he þan lig þare,” and “hasted him ful hard.”¹⁶⁵ Even a locked chamber proves unable to contain the lion, as a later battle with giants proves:

With his tayl þe erth he dang,
For to fight him thocht ful lang. [...]
Ful grete sorrow þe lioun has
In þe chameber whare he was; [...]
At þe last he come to þe thriswald;
þe erth þare kest he up ful sone,
Als fast als foure men sold have done
If þai had broght bath bill and spade;
A mekil hole ful sone he made. [...]
Now es þe lioun outbroken,
His maister sal ful sone be wroken. [avenged]
He rynnnes fast with ful felle rese, [rush]
þan helped it nocht to prai for pese.¹⁶⁶

The lion’s motion is unstoppable and explicit: he acts as a condensation of the mobile energy of the forest, which, in its first introduction, is conflated with its wild beasts, is the place where Ywain’s “woodness” causes him to wander aimlessly, and is the lion’s home. The poet gives this dynamism its most visible expression in the lion locked in the room, pacing and beating his tail against the ground, and finally so unable to wait that he digs a tunnel through the earth. This restlessness is also present in the wanderings of Ywain, Colgrevance, and Lunet, and expressed in the racing pace of the romance’s accelerating couplets. Wonderfully, in the English version, this unlikely family will live long and happy lives together and eventually arrive at their home space,

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 2592-96, 2606, 2611.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 3167-3246.

but even this final movement is a joyful, chaotic rush.¹⁶⁷ Although a line could be traced from the beginning to the end of this “quest,” such a simple representation seems artificial, and the enduring impression of the romance is one of changes in direction, wandering, interruption, speed, and the irresistibility of motion.

**“THE MAGNETISM OF THE NEXT STREETCORNER, OF A DISTANT MASS OF FOLIAGE”:¹⁶⁸
CONCLUSIONS**

Critics of medieval literature often approach tropes of the Middle Ages as emphatically separate from our own postmodern experience, with the result that irresponsible anachronisms are avoided at the cost of the alienation of medieval works and ideas. This is frequently true of metrical romance, considered a product of medieval literary taste difficult to fathom in our “more refined” time. Ad Putter, in a recent essay, provides a timely counterpoint, citing C. S. Lewis’ famous confession that he used to teach his students that “lovesickness was a purely literary motif, until he fell in love himself and found himself, like the pining hero of *Troilus and Criseyde*, unable to eat or sleep”; in Putter’s words: “responding to literary conventions is often a matter of appreciating that the ‘truths’ they embody are also embodied in ourselves.”¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷ Pan rade þai forth toward þe town,
And with þam ran þe gude lyoun.
When þai come to þe castel-zate,
Al went þai in þareat.

This moment is characterized by their rush—not in violence, now, but in peace—and the mood of the lady watching them arrive: “in hert sho was ful lyght.” *Ibid.*, 3953-56, 3962.

¹⁶⁸ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 417.

¹⁶⁹ Putter, “The Narrative Logic of Emaré,” 159.

Walter Benjamin's *Das Passagen-Werk*, known in English as *The Arcades Project*, consists of his notes over a thirteen-year period of exploring and meditating upon the Paris Arcades (*les passages*) between 1927 and 1940, finally compiled and published in 1982. At times, his wandering words create pictures reminiscent of images in medieval metrical romance, such as his description of the Paris Métro as an “underworld of names” which “in the lightning-scored, whistle-resounding darkness are transformed into misshapen sewer gods, catacomb fairies.”¹⁷⁰ The work—if it can be called a single work—is itself a labyrinth of thoughts, half-thoughts, and allusions. Within this heap of words, however, can be found some of our most evocative theorizations of the will to move, and *keep moving*:

An intoxication comes over the man who walks long and aimlessly through the streets. With each step, the walk takes on greater momentum; ever weaker grow the temptations of shops, of bistros, of smiling women, ever more irresistible the magnetism of the next streetcorner, of a distant mass of foliage, of a street name.¹⁷¹

More than one hundred pages later, he returns to this idea in his meditation upon the “street”:

The way brings with it the terrors of wandering [...] But the person who travels a street, it would seem, has no need of any waywise guiding hand. It is not in wandering that man takes to the street, but rather in submitting to the monotonous, fascinating, constantly unrolling band of asphalt. The synthesis of these twin terrors, however—monotonous wandering—is represented in the labyrinth.¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 84.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 417.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 519.

Walking the streets, according to Benjamin, transports us “into a vanished time”—to our own childhood, certainly, but not only to the life we have ourselves lived, but to other lives and times. “In the asphalt over which he passes, his steps awaken a surprising resonance”; the landscape becomes a “double ground,” the present and the past at once.¹⁷³

Benjamin’s depiction of the relationship between wandering and the human psyche can help us understand the nature of romance movement, and why these works might be so preoccupied with this trope. His characterization of the impulse to wander (and to continue perpetually) as a kind of “intoxication” that gathers momentum with every step relates directly to its similar presentation in romance. Benjamin’s writing also provides another window into the psychological draw of such movement, although, like the romancers, he tends to describe it rather than speculate about its causes. The “resonance” he describes, increasing with every step, also suggests that this phenomenon—directionless, irresistible movement through space—is aesthetically and emotionally powerful to experience and an important subject of poetic meditation. Ywain provides the prime example, most closely resembling Benjaminian wandering, although the same could be said of Heroudis, Orfeo, Lunet, and the wandering English people evoked in *Emaré*. There is always a good reason for Ywain to keep wandering rather than finally arriving at his destination, but taken together, his refusals to “abide” add up to an inescapable sense that there is something greater driving him. As the romance progresses, he is increasingly easy to divert; “with each step, the walk takes on greater momentum,”

¹⁷³ Ibid., 416.

and the temptations of stasis lose their power in comparison to the adventure that might exist in the next “distant mass of foliage,” the next forest. Monotonous wandering holds a power of its own: its capacity to create and prolong continued movement. Wandering itself, more than any specific adventure, begets more wandering. The aesthetic power of the Middle English metrical romance is in its ability to resonate with the same part of human nature to which Benjamin alludes: the temptation to “submit [...] to the monotonous, fascinating, constantly unrolling band of asphalt,” or the beaten dirt path through the forest.

The greatest power of these narrative poems, then, exists in movement itself—its creation through form and its narrative structure of submission to the compulsion to perpetually move, to never stop moving toward the next distant landscape. If Benjamin is right that wandering doubles the ground on which we walk with resonances of the past and transports us to a “vanished time,” then perhaps this time and place is the world of Middle English romance, or a more distant world that these poets were also imagining.

CHAPTER 4
MOVEMENT IN *LE MORTE DARTHUR*: MALORY'S "FYNE FORCE"¹

I have characterized movement in Middle English fourteenth-century metrical romance as surprisingly directionless, randomized, accelerating, and controlled by an indefinite impulse to wander. What happens to this network of trajectories, then, in later medieval romances, sometimes called “interlacing”? Helen Cooper, for example, who argues for the predominantly linear nature of the romance quest, nods to the interlacing romances as works in which “digression” becomes, to some extent, an end in itself.² I propose that we need to move farther away from the linear model of movement in later romance than Cooper and others suggest: motion becomes more pronounced and randomized, space is even more convoluted than in fourteenth-century metrical romance, and linearity has disappeared. The primary, monumental text that exemplifies this in the English fifteenth century is Sir Thomas Malory’s *Morte Darthur*. If movement through space is indeed a prevalent driving and shaping force in this work, we should be surprised that Malorian scholarship often emphasizes the absence of setting and the insignificance of narratives of travel from place to place—despite their omnipresence.³ What has been lost in this process is an understanding of the ways in which Malory’s narratives of

¹ All quotes from *Le Morte Darthur* are from Eugene Vinaver and P. J. C. Field, eds., *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, Third ed., 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 42.3.

² Cooper, *The English Romance in Time*, 46.

³ Andrew Lynch, *Malory’s Book of Arms: The Narrative of Combat in Le Morte Darthur* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997), 46. Mark Lambert, *Malory: Style and Vision in Le Morte Darthur* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1975), 78-79. Dhira B. Mahoney, “Symbolic Uses of Space in Malory’s *Morte Darthur*,” in *Re-Viewing Le Morte Darthur: Texts and Contexts*, ed. K. S. Whetter and Raluca Radulescu, 95-106 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005), 95.

movement in space constitute the aesthetic power, significance, and originality of the work. This chapter seeks to lay groundwork for that understanding, to bring Malory's motion into the rich critical conversation about his massive romance, and to foster appreciation for the author's narration of travel—his action verbs, including those that do not describe battle, that ironically become invisible to many readers because of their ubiquity.⁴ In addition to the physical movement narrated, Malory's words of transition—which often evoke spatial motion—and the structural relationship between his narratives produce the impression of constant motion that resists stasis, order, and codification. Malory also, at occasional but significant moments of narration, presents activity as occurring “meanwhile” (in relation to the primary narrative at that moment), creating the impression of a rich, sprawling world characterized by constant, simultaneous motion within and beyond the frame of perception and narration.

At the end of the previous chapter, I juxtaposed Walter Benjamin's depiction of wandering with the perpetual motion of romance, an “intoxicat[ing]” process in which “with each step, the walk takes on greater momentum,” building to a submission to directionless wandering.⁵ The road to carries one “into a vanished time”: space becomes a “double ground” with resonances of the life that the wanderer him or herself has lived as well as past lives and times, and this past is “all the more spellbinding because it is not

⁴ Scholarship that has given attention to action in *Le Morte Darthur* has focused almost exclusively on narratives of battle. See, for example, Rosamund S. Allen, “Reading Malory Aloud: Syntax, Gender, and Narrative Pace,” *Arthuriana* 13, no. 4 (2003) and Lynch, *Malory's Book of Arms: The Narrative of Combat in Le Morte Darthur*.

⁵ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1999), 417.

his own, not private.”⁶ This postmodern description illuminates the creation of space through motion in Middle English romance—and never more so than in Malory’s fifteenth-century book of wandering. In this monumental work, omnipresent, perpetual, non-linear movements—in the main frame of action as well as in the “meanwhile,” or subtext—create a rich, deeply textured Arthurian world. This space is indeed a “double ground,” both public and private, drawn from the fifteenth-century world in which Malory lived as well as his own imagined (and distilled from romance tradition) vision of the time of Arthur.

Malory criticism, for hundreds of years, has been more divided than with most works: *Le Morte Darthur* is often read for its social and political perspectives—its stark, formulaic, paratactic style frequently reviled and occasionally appreciated.⁷ Popularly, as Mark Lambert noted a few decades ago, it may be, alongside *The Canterbury Tales*, one

⁶ Ibid., 416.

⁷ Rosamund Allen, for example, agrees that Malory’s “so often decried paratactic style” “is often dismissed by critics”—it is “paratactic” in that its narrations are strings of coordinated grammatical structures linked by “and.” Bonnie Wheeler helped to establish our understanding of parataxis in Malory, characterizing it as a narrative structure in which “differing, even contrasting representations are juxtaposed and accepted sequentially by the reader.” Bonnie Wheeler, “Romance and Parataxis in Malory: The Case of Sir Gawain’s Repetition,” *Arthurian Literature* 12 (1993): 122. Allen also notes P. J. C. Field’s criticism of Malory’s parataxis and the tendency for modern readers to dislike it for its simplistic and conversational qualities. Allen seeks to change this perception, but less by praising Malory’s paratactic narrative than by highlighting the dynamism of *hypotaxis* (characterized by subordinating conjunctions) in dialogue, especially in speeches by female characters. These dialogues, Allen argues, successfully modulate pacing. Janet Jesmok, another appreciator of Malory’s style, characterizes herself as “continually struck by his extraordinary oral qualities and rhythms,” but again “leaves narrative voice for another time” and focuses on dialogue. Those critics who admire Malory’s style tend to be those involved in reading and recording the work aloud and who focus on speech. D. Thomas Hanks, one of these, declares: “it is definitely time for the *Morte Darthur* to be resurrected—to be performed as its composer intended it to be performed.” Malory’s prose is indeed particularly powerful in its aural characteristics, but the present argument, in contrast to these, applies to narration even more than dialogue. Allen, “Reading Malory Aloud: Syntax, Gender, and Narrative Pace,” 71, 76. Janet Jesmok, “Reading Malory Aloud: Poetic Qualities and Distinctive Voice,” *Arthurian Literature* 12 (1993): 87. D. Thomas Hanks, Jr., “Epilogue: Malory’s ‘Morte Darthur’ and ‘the Place of Voice,’” *Arthurian Literature* 12 (1993): 129.

of the two Middle English books that “one could say are now widely loved.”⁸ Something in this over five hundred-year-old book continues to resonate with readers, inspiring appreciation and parody; certainly, the magnetism of its great tragedy and the desire to read early versions of the popular stories of Arthur and his world bring people to the text. I believe that what keeps them there, however, is Malory’s unique employment of motion and the space it constitutes: the “Forest of Adventures.” The multilayered movement of the text contributes to its enduring resonance to an extent that has been underestimated. This chapter, then, “overleaping” (to use one of Malory’s verbs of transition) from the fourteenth to the fifteenth century, will trace the movements of *Le Morte Darthur* briefly through its context and production, demonstrating its textual *mouvance* in a book culture removed from that of the late fourteenth century and yet dealing with and driven by similar complexities. The increasing concern with codification and regularity at the advent of printing—contemporary with the composition of *Le Morte*—is apparent in this work, but, as its structure and context testifies, did not yield a truly less mobile text. This extratextual mobility colors the remainder of the chapter, the focus of the study: Malory’s narrative movements, the surprising and unique mobility of his style, and the space of the forest as it shapes and is shaped by the questing-wandering—the line between these two types of movement is, if existent, very thin—trajectories of men, women, and beasts.

⁸ Lambert, *Malory: Style and Vision in Le Morte Darthur*, ix.

TEXTUAL *MOUVANCE*

It is appropriate that Paul Zumthor, who introduced the concept of textual “*mouvance*” now influential in all literary fields, was a medievalist. He defines this term as:

le caractère de l’oeuvre qui, comme telle, avant l’âge du livre, resort d’une quasi-abstraction, les texts concrets qui la réalisent présentant, par le jeu des variants et remaniements, comme une incessante vibration et une instabilité fondamentale.

[the nature of a work which, as such, before the age of the book, is almost an abstraction, and the concrete texts whereby it is realized present, through the play of variants and recastings, a kind of ceaseless vibration and a fundamental instability.]⁹

As the current chapter seeks to demonstrate, *Le Morte Darthur* is characterized by this kind of incessant vibration and a fundamental instability, on more than one level. The story of its composition, editing, production, circulation, and modern scholarship testify to this fact—as does its narrative and style, paradoxically in a work that seems to attempt to introduce a stable narrative to disparate Arthurian traditions. Also present in this story of editing and scholarship is a narrative that is rehearsed again and again in Malory’s text: the frustration of unity and linearity. On micro and macro levels, in terms of individual knights’ quests and larger structural patterns, much like the story of the book itself, *Le Morte Darthur* traces linear movements that become a multidirectional tangle. The following section traces a few of the highlights of this story of complex, sometimes apparently random leaps from edition to edition, editor to editor, the physical movement of copies to and from printing houses, and other trajectories of circulation and influence

⁹ Paul Zumthor, *Essai de Poétique Médiévale* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972), 507. Translation from Ivana Djordjevic, “Mapping Medieval Translation,” in *Medieval Insular Romance: Translation and Innovation*, ed. Judith Weiss, Jennifer Fellows, and Morgan Dickson (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), 20.

that mark this text. The resultant picture is one of fluctuation, instability, and “vibration,” consistent, on this extranarrative level, with *Le Morte Darthur*’s “overleaping” and convoluted narrative and formal movements.

The end of the Winchester Manuscript (Winchester College MS. 13), the earliest manuscript of Malory’s *Morte Darthur*, provides tantalizing information about its authorship and relationship to other trajectories of influence. Narrating Arthur’s death, Malory writes: “thus of Arthur I fynde no more wrytten in bokis that bene auctorysed,” and in the last paragraph of the text proper: “for the Frensshe booke maketh mencyon—and it is auctorysed—that syr Bors, syr Ector, syr Blamour and syr Bleoberis wente into the Holy Lande, thereas Jesu Cryst was quycke and deed” (1242.3-4, 1260.8-10).

Nowhere does he elaborate on the notion of “authorization”—who is doing the authorizing, and by what standards?—nor does he identify the authoritative Frensshe book,” although he refers to it for authority many times throughout the text. The following are the final words of the Winchester Manuscript:

I praye you all jentylmen and jentylwymmen that redeth this booke of Arthur and his knyghtes from begynnyng to endynge, praye for me whyle I am on lyve that God sende me good delyveraunce. And whan I am deed, I praye you all praye for me soule. For this book was ended the ninth yere of the reygne of Kyng Edward the Fourth, by Syr Thomas Maleoré, Knyght, as Jesu helpe hym for hys grete might, as he is the servaunt of Jesu bothe day and nyght. (1260.20-29)¹⁰

¹⁰ It is notable, even in the late Middle Ages, that Malory specifically addresses “jentylwymmen,” although perfectly consistent with medieval reading practices—both silent and aloud, during which young women were often the ones given the task of reading. This is reflected in literature as well as historical documents. It is also a colorful touch that he seems to privilege those who have taken the time to read the book cover to cover, a fitting sentiment for a massive volume of 473 leaves of high quality French paper, and one that questions Vinaver’s controversial conclusion that “*Le Morte Darthur*” is actually eight separate works. The title given here suggests reference to the entire text and not merely the last section.

As presented here, the intended audience, single authorship, and date of composition are clear. Caxton's printed version (1485), the basis of authoritative editions of Malory for almost 450 years until the 1934 discovery of the Winchester—still widely loved and read, although more often in classrooms and for pleasure than in published scholarship¹¹—ends with the colophon “Caxton me fieri fecit” [Caxton caused me to be made], hinting at the complex relationship between author and printer. It was long held that these two texts were completely independent of one another, until the revelation in 1978 that changed the textual debate forever: Lotte Hellinga reported that she had discovered “offsets of printing ink” from Caxton's found on the Winchester Manuscript, some that he began using in 1480 and others that he stopped using in 1483, and determined that the manuscript must have been present in Caxton's printing house during the years prior to his publication of the *Morte*, adding a concrete location at a specific time to the murky story of this manuscript's physical travels.¹²

The most immediate complexity presented by *Le Morte Darthur* to the scholar is the dramatic difference in form between these two earliest extant versions. Caxton's is

¹¹ In Bonnie Wheeler and Michael N. Salda's introduction to *The Malory Debate*, they note that “even though editions based on Caxton's print fell out of official critical favor after 1947, they remained then and remain yet today in classroom use, in footnotes of critical essays, and apparently in the hearts of many who call themselves Malorians.” T. H. White preferred the 1899 Caxton Globe edition edited by Sir Edward Strachey; he “owned at least four copies of Malory, but only Strachey's is well-eared and full of annotations.” They also mention that many Malory scholars “teethed on Caxton's Malory,” and that writing about Vinaver's edition by scholars including C. S. Lewis contains a kind of “wistfulness” for “the Malory of their youth.” Bonnie Wheeler and Michael Salda, “Introduction: The Debate on Editing Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*,” in *The Malory Debate: Essays on the Texts of Le Morte Darthur*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler, Robert L. Kindrick, and Michael N. Salda (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), x-xi. I count myself among those scholars who began reading and being drawn into Malory's writing via Caxton and consider it the product of powerful and artistic editing, despite my use of Vinaver here and my conviction that his edition is a work of beautiful as well as impressive scholarship.

¹² P. J. C. Field, *Malory: Texts and Sources* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1998), 2.

clearly a more unified book—a single narrative of hundreds of chapters, each with a linking *incipit* written by Caxton himself. These *incipits* form a far more linear story than Malory’s text itself, and work to organize the reader’s movement through the work into a singular trajectory. The Winchester, on the other hand—and it is important to note that this pair of texts straddles the line between printing and scribal hand-copying—is divided into eight books that are more independent in their presentation; their level of independence famously causing Eugene Vinaver, its first editor, to conclude that the book should be entitled *Complete Works*, although, as Cooper states in her 1998 edition of the manuscript, “there are probably few scholars now who would take up as extreme a position as Vinaver did.”¹³ Still, these more independent sections in the Winchester—at moments within as well as between “books”—cause the reader, sometimes jarringly, to leap from story to story without the smooth explanations of Caxton’s *incipits* and in some cases without clear spatial or temporal transitions, creating the impression of repeatedly leaping, or being thrown, from one narrative to another.

This division is thoroughly represented in *The Malory Debate: Essays on the Texts of Le Morte Darthur*, edited by Bonnie Wheeler, Robert L. Kindrick, and Michael N. Salda in 2000; one of the essays within this collection, however, by Kevin T. Grimm, suggests potential harmony between the versions.

A careful reading of Caxton’s preface and Vinaver’s introductory material, in fact, will show that they are often not so far apart in their views of Malory’s text as Malorians have thought. Caxton’s comments on the nature of the book he is printing testify to his awareness of its extremely variegated and heterogeneous nature, as does his decision to produce a table of rubrics as a guide to the reader.

¹³ Helen Cooper, “Introduction,” in *Le Morte Darthur: The Winchester Manuscript*, ed. Helen Cooper (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), xxii.

Vinaver, for all his emphasis on the separateness of the tales, often calls them a ‘series,’ and he prints them in the same order as Caxton did, *not* in the order in which he believes they were written.¹⁴

Although it seems that this argument might resolve these disparate foci, Grimm in fact uses it as a basis to shift the complexity to another shaping force: the activity of Wynkyn de Worde. It is Malory’s second printer, de Worde, Grimm argues, who is responsible for the subsequent pre-Winchester understanding of the *Morte* as unproblematically unified and for Vinaver’s dramatic reaction against this. Grimm contends that de Worde accomplished this in part through the remarkable unity of the illustrations in his post-Caxton editions of Malory (*The Noble and Joyous History of the Book Entitled Le Morte Darthur*, 1498 and 1529).¹⁵ Wynkyn de Worde’s printed volume “enforced Caxtonian unity on every page of the text,” he writes, and Vinaver’s response is therefore “not simply a response to Caxton’s edition, but a response to what Caxton’s edition had become.”¹⁶ By the time of de Worde’s edition, some of the jarring formal motion of *Le Morte Darthur* had been lost, but the mobility and instability of Malory’s work can be ironically traced through its editors’ concerted attempts to unify it; its resistance to this unification is communicated through the still inconsistent and unstable form of many sections within even these attempts at narrative linearity.

Any printed version of Malory, then, is mediated through the hands of its printers, but observation of the Winchester Manuscript itself reveals the influence of another hand:

¹⁴ Kevin T. Grimm, “Wynkyn de Worde and the Creation of Malory’s *Morte Darthur*,” in *The Social and Literary Contexts of Malory’s Morte Darthur*, ed. D. Thomas Hanks, Jr. and Jessica Brogdon, 134-59 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), 135.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 153.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 135.

the scribe's. This scribal hand embodies a number of unique features, and it is now impossible to know whether these features were related in any way to Malory's intentions or if they were the scribe's independent decision. Most notable of these is the striking red-lettering. Names, some place names, the word "Sankgreal," headings, *explicit*s, and the words on Arthur's tomb all appear in red ink.¹⁷ This aspect of the text, which dramatically inflects the experience of the reader and is suggestive of a variety of structural and thematic conclusions, is completely lost in almost all modern editions, excluding Stephen H. A. Shepherd's 2004 Norton Critical Edition, which seeks to recreate the experience of reading the Winchester Manuscript by reproducing its initial capitals, font changes, spelling inconsistencies, and the rubrication of names.¹⁸ These names in bold, expensive red ink in an otherwise simple manuscript clearly suggest the significance of these elements to the text—certainly to the reader's experience of the text, which becomes like reading a heraldic register, the names emphasized as if the purpose of the book is to immortalize them. The movement of a reader's eye across the page is slowed as it reaches these names; it is also quite possible to scan a page of this manuscript and only focus on the red-letters, jumping from name to name, turning a narrative into a list of or monument to famous knights. This complicates the produced experience of motion, which is then divided between the interruptive role of the names to a left-to-right, line-by-line reading process and the disjunctive motion of leaping from name to name, skipping pieces of the narrative. The uncertain origin of this red-lettering

¹⁷ N. R. Ker, ed. *The Winchester Malory: A Facsimile*, Early English Text Society (London: Oxford University Press, 1976).

¹⁸ Malory, Sir Thomas, *Le Morte Darthur*, ed. Stephen H. A. Shepherd (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2004).

also adds another trajectory of production to the *Morte*, which increasingly resembles a convoluted network.

Lotte Hellinga's discovery, mentioned above, suggested a linear progression from the Winchester Manuscript to Caxton's edition; forensic evidence, however, frustrated this linearity, which has been generally debunked. Field's suggestion, resembling Vinaver's, is currently the most convincing—despite my own and others' aversion to “lost original” theories—that the Winchester was in Caxton's possession but used only as an ancillary source, and that both Winchester and Caxton were based on another, possibly the original, now lost.¹⁹

Another trajectory of the network of *Le Morte* is present in all manuscripts and editions: Malory's frequent references to his sources and his diegetic distancing of authorship from himself. Frequently, especially when he makes a historical claim about a famous character, Malory refers to “the Frensshe booke” and the concept of “auctoryte.” Although the texts and traditions that Malory draws on date back to Geoffrey of Monmouth in the 1130s, and it is likely that he was aware of many of the key English Arthurian texts—probably including some of the popular romances mentioned in the previous chapter—his primary source is indeed a “Frensshe booke,” or books. As Ralph Norris summarizes: “for the most part, the *Morte Darthur* is a retelling of significant parts of the three great Old French prose Arthurian cycles, the Vulgate or Lancelot-Graal Cycle, the cyclic version of the Prose *Tristan*, and the Post-Vulgate Cycle or the

¹⁹ Field, *Malory: Texts and Sources*, 2-3.

Romance of the Grail.”²⁰ Even this “French Book” is not a monolithic source, but a mobile set of texts that are themselves compilations of tales passed through multiple hands. To complicate this further, Book II, *The Tale of the Noble King Arthur that was Emperor Himself through Dignity of his Hands*, is significantly influenced by the *Alliterative Morte Arthur*, and many passages and complete tales—most notably the tale of Sir Gareth—seem to be original to Malory. Although the same can be said of most medieval authors, it is particularly apparent that Malory’s role is not merely “author,” but imitator, compiler, translator, editor, artist. It is impossible, and I argue unnecessary, to locate portions of the text that are Malory’s “pure” work; every part of *Le Morte* is inflected and partially formed by the movement of its source-texts and the oral and social discourse circulating around them.²¹

As described in the previous chapters in relation to a variety of fourteenth-century literature, the social, political, and literary discourses at the time of *Le Morte Darthur*’s publication comprise multidirectional trajectories of movement and influence. Literary tastes, however, had changed by the later fifteenth century, and scholars are divided about whether this work was appropriate to the preferences of the reading public or the wrong book at the wrong time—the creation of an author who is, in a sense, attempting to slow

²⁰ Ralph Norris, *Malory’s Library: The Sources of the Morte Darthur* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008), 4.

²¹ As I hope my approach makes clear, however, I contend that it would be a mistake to subordinate Malory’s own work to the other forces mentioned here, or even to put them on an even playing field, as some New Historicist critics would support. I will refer to the text as Malory’s, and *Le Morte Darthur* is predominantly the product of the work of a unique author. It would be equally mistaken, however, not to give attention to the other influences that clearly shaped any edition of Malory and which tie it to its social, historical, and print/manuscript cultural context. While I privilege Malory’s role, his is one (dominant) trajectory of many, another of which is created by each reader/listener, medieval or modern. This is especially true in a text of such economic language, which often merely sketches its stories, leaving more than the usual space for interpretation and the imagination.

the motion of time through a narrative that invokes the past. C. S. Lewis famously observes that Malory was trying to harvest “the ripe fruits of the Middle Ages when the Middle Ages were already over,”²² and Terence McCarthy notes the oft-forgotten fact that Caxton’s edition of *Le Morte Darthur* should technically be considered “the first great work of Tudor literature,” arguing that Malory’s writing was completely alien to Tudor tastes and hence “a book that came at the wrong time.”²³ This may be, but Malory’s (and Caxton’s) texts were also apparently produced under public demand. Robert L. Kelly argues convincingly for a link between *Le Morte Darthur* and the political climate of England, claiming that in his framing of the early wars of Arthur’s career “Malory employs the same patterns of thought and habits of analysis by means of which his intended audience interpreted the political struggles of their own era.”²⁴ P. J. C. Field presents the relationship between Malory’s narrative and several historical events, including most poignantly his representation of Arthur’s final battle and the Battle of

²² C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), 156.

²³ “Although Sir Thomas Malory finished writing his Arthuriad in the ninth year of the reign of Edward IV (1469-70), it is likely that very few manuscripts of this version existed and that only a very limited public had access to it. The last of the Plantagenet kings, Richard III, was still on the throne when Caxton finished printing Malory’s text on 31 July 1485, but the book could not have been ready for sale at this date because we know that neither the table of contents nor the preface had been printed.” Terence McCarthy, “Old Worlds, New Worlds: King Arthur in England,” in *The Social and Literary Contexts of Malory’s Morte Darthur*, ed. D. Thomas Hanks, Jr., 6-23 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), 5, 7.

²⁴ Robert L. Kelly, “Malory’s ‘Tale of King Arthur’ and the Political Geography of Fifteenth-Century England,” in *Re-Viewing Le Morte Darthur*, ed. K. S. Whetter and Raluca Radulescu, 79-94 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005), 93. Related to the present argument, Kelly concludes that “besides providing new insights into the text of the *Morte Darthur*, this method of re-viewing Malory can also disclose how meaning may in some instances be subtly negotiated through the interplay of author, text, political environment, and reader.”

Towton in the War of the Roses, “the bloodiest battle ever fought on English soil.”²⁵

Elsewhere, Field suggests that previous to writing *Le Morte Malory* experienced “the most turbulent eighteen months in fifteenth-century English history,” and, in reference to Malory’s allusion to the use of “grete gonnes” by Mordred, that Malory would have seen or heard similar cannons “from one side or the other” firing at the real Tower of London in 1460.²⁶

Other Malorians, such as Karen Cherewatuk and Larry D. Benson, observe that fifteenth-century readers demanded single-volume codices from a genre of literature that was created through “combining, condensing, and reordering materials of several older volumes in order to produce a single volume shaped to the taste of the time.”²⁷ These works, referred to at the time as “grete bokes” and currently known as a type of “miscellany,” comprised a large part of the volumes that were being produced in the mid-to late fifteenth century and consumed by Malory’s social peers.²⁸ With the support of her study of vast quantities of fifteenth-century gentry correspondence and the reading material kept by this sub-nobility upper class, Raluca L. Radulescu has contended that Malory’s composition and Caxton’s printing were shaped by demand among the gentry.²⁹

²⁵ P. J. C. Field, “Malory and the Battle of Towton,” in *The Social and Literary Contexts of Malory’s Morte Darthur*, ed. D. Thomas Hanks, Jr., 68-74 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), 74.

²⁶ P. J. C. Field, *The Life and Times of Sir Thomas Malory* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993), 122-24.

²⁷ Larry D. Benson, *Malory’s Morte Darthur* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1976), 23. Karen Cherewatuk, “Sir Thomas Malory’s ‘Grete Booke,’” in *The Social and Literary Contexts of Malory’s Morte Darthur*, ed. D. Thomas Hanks, Jr., 42-67 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000).

²⁸ Raluca L. Radulescu, *The Gentry Context for Malory’s Morte Darthur* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003), 14.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

Caxton himself claims in his preface that “many noble and dyvers gentylnen of thys royame of Englonde” had come to him and requested the publication of a comprehensive English Arthurian work.³⁰ This ties the *Morte* to literary demand and fashion, as well as diversity of place and influence. Radulescu argues that “Malory’s work should be regarded as part of a shifting culture, which involved [...] a rewriting of romance as an epic of a heroic age, but one which would create a new visionary past for the history of the English people,” underlining the role of the multidirectional influences of a rich social, literary, spatial, and political context.³¹

The purpose of this account of the formal and historical influences upon *Le Morte Darthur*—which only begins to tell the story—is not to suggest the impossibility of precise study or to subordinate the role of the author to other creative forces. A discursive context cannot write a book, and I will refer to the book as singular and as Malory’s because of a conviction that the author’s role is still primary as well as for convenience. These forces can (and do) certainly shape an author’s writing, and the forms through which the text is communicated, the places to which the text travels and in which it is read, and the complexity of influence is even greater in *Le Morte Darthur* than in most medieval texts. This context, even without a close reading of the narrative itself, also begins to reveal Malory’s work as a text of movement, flux, and instability—a network of

³⁰ “After that I had accomplysshed and fynysshed dyvers hystories as wel of contemplacyon as of other hystorial and worldly actes of grete conquerours and prynces, and also certeyn books of ensamples and doctryne, many noble and dyvers gentylnen of thys royame of Englonde camen and demaunded me many and oftymes wherfore that I have not do made and enprynte the noble hystorie of the Saynte Greale and of the moost renommed Crysten kyng, fyrst and chyef of the thre best Crysten, and worthy, Kyng Arthur, whyche ought moost to be remembred emonge us Englysshemen tofore al other Crysten kynges” (cxlii).

³¹ Radulescu, *The Gentry Context for Malory’s Morte Darthur*, 71.

incomplete, interweaving, and apparently random trajectories. Despite Malory's attempt at the codification of the stories of Arthur, and Caxton's and de Worde's attempts to unify Malory's text, the resultant work has never been and will never be "static."

**“WHERE IS HE?” SAID THE KYNG.
‘SIR,’ SAID ULFIUS, ‘HE WILLE NOT DWELLE LONG.’”³²**

Uther Pendragon's question (above) and Ulfius' failure to answer directly appear in the very first pages of *Le Morte Darthur*, and refer to a character who embodies Zumthor's "incessante vibration et une instabilité fondamentale." Even the spelling of his name—Merlyn or Merlion, neither seems privileged over the other—suffers from this kind of vibration. His physical form is fundamentally unstable; he appears to the king and the other knights, often for no more reason than one of his enigmatic jokes, as a child, a youth, a hunter, a beggar, or an old man. Merlin's first appearance is narrated by the kind of unlikely bending of space, through motion and "by adventure," that I argue is one of the *Morte's* primary phenomena:

‘Wel, my lord,’ said syre Ulfius, ‘I shal seke Merlyn and he shalle do yow remedy, that youre herte shal be pleasyd.’ So Ulfius departed and by adventure he mette Merlyn in a beggars aray, and ther Merlyn asked Ulfius whome he soughte, and he said he had lytyl ado to telle hym. ‘Well,’ saide Merlyn, ‘I knowe whome thou sekest, for thou sekest Merlyn; therefore seke no ferther, for I am he.’ (8.13-19)

As in the first introduction of the dreamer in *Piers Plowman*, Merlin is dressed as a ragged wanderer.³³ No one, Ulfius included, knows where he will be found in his

³² Eugene Vinaver and P. J. C. Field, eds., *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, 8.31-32.

³³ In a passage that appears shortly thereafter, Merlin's apparel is still more reminiscent of Will, who "shoop [him] into a shroud as [he] a sheep weere": in "the foreyste of Sherewood," "Merlion was so

constant wandering—he seems to have no home-space—but in Malory's world it is no surprise that he is found immediately "by adventure." He is a master of movement; like the fairies in *Sir Orfeo*, he is facilitator of invisibility and infiltration, and when he shows himself to Uther for the first time, he is an apparition at the edge of a mobile space, "where [he] stood at the porche of the pavelions dore" (8.33-34).³⁴

Merlin habitually instigates movement, and his sage advice often amounts to "go!"—as when he advises Uther: "ye may not lye so as ye doo, for ye must to the feld, though ye ryde on an hors-lyttar. For ye shall never have the better of your enemyes but yf your persone be there" (11.21-24). His constant traveling, sudden appearances, and essential embodiment of motion render Ulfius' non-answer surprisingly appropriate.

Where is Merlin? He is at the lack of a fixed location, and in the impulse to move. The end of this man's story—already a figure rich with over four centuries of literary allusion by the time of Malory—is fittingly abrupt and underlines his role as a manifestation of movement in darkly ironic fashion. It requires a superlative prison to stop his incessant motion: a hole "in a roche [...] that went undir a grete stone"; the story leaves him not in death but in eternal stasis (126.22-23). The movements he sets in motion at the beginning of the tale, however, continue to drive Malory's narrative.

Although Merlin is certainly unique in the *Morte*, his representation as a mobile force is part of a larger framework. The impulse to move explicitly and incessantly

disgysed that kynge Arthure knew hym nat, for he was all befurred in blacke shepis skynnes" (38.5-7). William Langland, *Will's Visions of Piers Plowman, the B Version*, ProL.2.

³⁴ For example, when for Arthur's safety he must travel past King Pellinore without fighting, Merlin performs "suche a crauffte unto kynge Pellinore" that he "saw nat kynge Arthure, and so passed by withoute ony wordis" (54.8-10). Malory frequently narrates that "Merlion toke hys leve," or "therewith Merlion vanysshed away suddeynly" (72.33, 73.4-5).

dominates the text, and perhaps it is because it is so explicit that so many readers of *Le Morte* have ignored it as a subject of literary interest. Elizabeth Edwards is representative of the branch of twenty-first-century Malory scholarship that gives attention to the physical, and she also seeks the driving force that controls the interwoven trajectories of the book, but finds it instead in the solid, static symbol (shields, sleeves, apples): “material signifiers cause narratives; [...] narrative in the *Morte Darthur* coalesces around symbols and deploys symbolic patterns, that is, follows the trajectory of the symbol.”³⁵ The striking appearance of these objects makes her thorough thesis attractive, and it captures the critical importance of materiality, but I contend that representations of the subjects that comprise these trajectories—and descriptions of the trajectories themselves—outnumber and overshadow these material objects and should draw our attention because of, not in spite of, their omnipresence in Malory’s text. The very repetition of verbs of movement has caused casual readers and scholars to skim over them, and the fact that their ubiquity in the text could indicate significance is overlooked. Narratives of motion have been seen as “filler” lines, when they should be understood as constitutive of the book’s driving force and uniquely mobile space.

To a greater extent than even *Ywain and Gawain*, narratives of movement across space—questing, wandering, “hurtling together,” and descriptions of speed and ferocity—dominate *Le Morte Darthur*. Nearly all of Malory’s episodes begin and end in motion, and the more meditative temporal descriptions that begin a bare few sequences usually serve to emphasize the subsequent action that always arrives quickly to shatter

³⁵ Elizabeth Edwards, *The Genesis of Narrative in Malory’s Morte Darthur* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001), 178.

the fleeting stillness. The resonant, epic temporal introduction to the entire work, “hit befel in the dayes of Uther Pendragon,” is still technically a description of action—of what “befel”—and the narrator soon demonstrates that what befell was the chaos of “warre,” jealousy, and frantic escape in which Igrayne and her husband “ryde all nyghte” (7:1-17). Similarly, at the beginning of the final book, when Malory provides a seasonal opening reminiscent of more meditative passages in the works of Chaucer and other medieval authors, in the course of its single sentence the comfort of spring is destroyed by the “wyndis and blastis” of winter and the parallel “grete angur and unhappe that stynted nat tylle the floure of chivalry of alle the worlde was destroyed and slayne” (1161:1-8). A related and repeated narrative pattern at the opening of tales is based on Arthur’s practice also found in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (that “he wolde nat go that day to mete unto that he had herde other sawe of a grete mervayle”); far less time is spent in Malory’s work on descriptions of the preceding feast, and neither Arthur nor the reader is forced to wait long before we hear that “here at hande commyth strange adventures” (293.9-10, 19-20). When, in a rare moment at court Malory narrates of the knights and ladies that “all they stood styлле,” the stillness lasts for only the space of a breath before the travel continues and “so sir Trystramys departede and toke the see” (392.29, 33). In an early episode, at Arthur’s wedding feast, Merlin humorously commands all of the knights to “sitte styлле”—a difficult command to follow in such a mobile world—but he only does so to make way for the kind of joyfully chaotic, non-fatally-violent movement that characterizes much of *Le Morte*, often forgotten in favor of the tragedy of the final book.

Ryght so as they sate there com rennyng in a whyght herte into the hall, and a whyght brachet next hym, and thirty couple of blacke rennyng houndis com afftir with a grete cry. And the herte wente aboute the Rounde Table, and as he wente by the syde-bourdis the brachet ever boote hym by the buttock and pulde outte a pece, wherethorow the herte lope a grete lepe and overthrew a knyght that sate at the syde-bourde. And therewith the knight arose and toke up the brachet, and so wente forthe oute of the halle and toke hys horse and rode hys way with the brachett. (102.26-103.3)

Like the contrasting rhythms described in earlier chapters, stillness is always fleeting and only serves to frame motion—by which, in terms of descriptions, it is vastly outnumbered—and this opening of the adventure of the white hart is one of literally hundreds of passages that are comprised by and result in emphatic movement. It is also an excellent example of a tendency that characterizes space in the *Morte*, especially the forest: rapid entrances and exits into and from clearly framed spaces. Here, we begin to see that Malory's space is like a patchwork fabric, a maze, or perhaps more accurately a mobile cloud, of frames that can be entered and exited from different times and places without regard for geographical realism,³⁶ the passage from one to another producing narrative. Each space is defined by one, or more than one, adventure—always a trajectory of motion either contained within or traversing multiple spaces. The spatial and temporal

³⁶ As mentioned in Chapter Three, however, there is tantalizing evidence that a traveler through a medieval forest, even in the fifteenth century, may have had something like this experience because of the process of “assarting”, the creation of a network of clearings, occupied by people and animals. Malory's unique bending of space toward and within the forest is imaginative and stylistic, although not without analogues to other writers about space. The physical form of the forest, of course, and the difficulty of traveling in a straight line through it, lends itself to directionlessness and wandering. The visual phenomenon of looking through trees tends toward an illusory and confusing impression of distance, and their trunks break up lines of sight, troubling the linearity of both movement and perception. Bachelard, for example, considers the “immensity” of the forest a subject worthy of “detailed examination,” writing, “for this ‘immensity’ originates in a body of impressions which, in reality, have little connection with geographical information. We do not have to be long in the woods to experience the always rather anxious impression of ‘going deeper and deeper’ into a limitless world. Soon, if we do not know where we are going, we no longer know where we are [... The forest] accumulates its infinity within its own boundaries.” Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 185-86.

relationships between one space and another, however, are too convoluted to be seen as any kind of stable, even labyrinthine grid; they are more like a randomized tangle of locations in motion. Malory's narrator freely leaps throughout this network, highlighting whichever frame seems relevant, producing a narrative of sudden leaps and jumps, often without transition, troubling any sense of the linearity expected in quest trajectories.

An incredible percentage of Malory's textual space is comprised by descriptions of travel through this landscape, often dozens on the same page, producing a dizzying network of multi-linear motion. This is true from the very beginning, when Ulfius, seeking Merlin, "rood on more than a paas" (8.28). In the famous Christmas tournament, Malory narrates that young Arthur "rode fast after the swerd" (13.26). During early battles, as is often forgotten because action is taken up by his knights in later tales, Arthur is a dynamic force, to be found "ever" "in the formest prees tyl his hors was slayne underne the hym," smighting "behind and before" (19.16-17). With the arrival of the quests, which appear simultaneously in the work with the forest, the narration accelerates still more. Although Lancelot, Tristram, Gawain, and the other knights take the reins of movement in the majority of *Le Morte*, it is Arthur who sets it in motion, in the moment when Arthur enters the forest, sees "a grete harte before hym," and decides: "'thys harte woll I chace" (41.34-42.1).

From this early adventure, movement is omnipresent, superlative, and literally breathless, beginning immediately as Arthur "spurred hys horse and rode aftir longe, and so by fyne force ofty n he was lyke to have smytten the herte. Wherefore as the kynge had chased the herte so longe that hys horse lost his brethe and felle downe dede" (42.2-5).

Sir Gryfflet, in a representative passage a few pages later, “toke [...] hys horse in grete haste and dressed hys shelde and toke a spere in hys honde, and so he rode a grete walop” (47.17-19). Despite frequent warnings, such as one from Sir Balin to Sir Launceor—“ye had bene bettir to holde you at home”—knights, including Balin, continue to ride ceaselessly.³⁷ Sometimes this travel is given a spatial or temporal designation, such as “fyftene dayes,” but more often than not it is left vague: “they rode more than a paas”; “Sir Gawayne rode more than a pace”; “and so they departed [...] and sir Gawayne followed hys queste”; “and so he rode forth”; “than he waloppyd further and fette his course”; “they rode,” “he rode,” “thys mayde rode” (87.11, 103.31, 104.28-29, 132.14, 563.22, 872.22, 114.12, 269.29). After the narration of several of Lancelot’s interlacing quests, Malory gives us a kind of summation of the travels of his superlative knight: “so sir Launcelot rode many wylde wayes thorowoute morys and mares” [moors and marshes] (284.1-16). Much later, in his madness, Lancelot again (or more accurately, still) “wandred here and there” and “ever ran wylde woode frome place to place,” for “two yere” (817.24-28). On the surface, these frantic, wandering movements may seem fundamentally different from his earlier questing, but they are more related than disparate: both are ceaseless, directionless motion, driven by an impulse that is never quite defined. Still later, after Lancelot’s “restoration” and the Grail Quest, Arthur asks: “but where is sir Launcelot?” and the court’s answer summarizes Malory’s representation of Lancelot more completely and sympathetically than the other episodes more frequently remembered. “Sir,” they say, “we wote not where he ys, but we deme

³⁷ For example, shortly after this warning is delivered, Malory narrates of Balin’s party: “so on the morne they rode all three towarde kynge Pellam, and they had fyftene dayes journey or they com thydir” (83.7-8).

he ys ryddyn to som adventure, as he ys offtyntymes wonte to do, for he had sir Lavaynes horse” (1135.19-22).

The combination of indefinite or unknown location with materiality and practicality (“for he had sir Lavaynes horse”) in the above passage is characteristic of Malory’s narrative, and one of the secrets to his book’s enduring power. Malory’s horses are often the subjects of his practical observations. They are everywhere in the text, often unsympathetically ridden to death, and yet integral to the knights’ identities and the subject of some of the knights’ most sorrowful meditations.³⁸ They are invisibly present in every narrative of “riding,” and specifically mentioned more frequently than any other creatures or accouterments in *Le Morte*. The key to their paradoxical representation—although glimmers of something like companionship occasionally appear—is that *horses mean movement*, and their absence means the horror of stasis: being trapped without a prison. Their importance underlines the critical nature of movement to the text, and their representation—especially when the horse is compared to the knight’s heart or will—provide insight into the nature of this motion.

The vast majority of the verbs of movement, in spite of some appearances of “yode” and “wente on foote,” are those of riding. “Riden,” of course, primarily meant “to ride on horseback” in the fifteenth century; in the words of the *Oxford English*

³⁸ cf. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “The Inhuman Circuit,” in *Thinking the Limits of the Body*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Gail Weiss (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003). Lambert and Vinaver also note Malory’s emphatic focus on the importance of horses to knightly existence, citing the comment near the end of the book, “and soo their horses wente where they wolde, for they toke no regarde of no wordly rychesses [...]” (1255.8-9). “This remark, absent from *M*’s sources, seems to reflect the attitude of a man who knows from experience the value of a horse to a knight-warrior. The underlying thought is that the moment a knight has ceased to take care of his horse his worldly life has ended’ [...] the sentence I have quoted shows that he understands how much they can be worth to a knight-artist as well as to a knight-warrior.” Lambert, *Malory: Style and Vision in Le Morte Darthur*, 89.

Dictionary: “to sit on and direct the movement of a horse or other animal.”³⁹

Revealingly, three of the *OED*'s four fifteenth-century examples of the word used in this sense are taken from romance, and one of these is *Le Morte Darthur*, highlighting the predominance of this verb in the genre and this particular work.⁴⁰ This word, however, also has broader late medieval connotations of rapid motion. The *Middle English Dictionary* lists one of its definitions as “to move quickly,” and “riden,” was even used, in relation to weather, to mean “to become disturbed.”⁴¹ The ubiquity of “riden,” through these connotations of this dominant verb of *Le Morte Darthur*, underlines the rushing, wild movement that characterizes its narrative. “Riden” implies speed, momentum, and even—subtly—chaos, consistent with this work's form and structure as well as its constant narrative depiction of motion. These connotations also relate, of course, in a material and practical sense, to the jarring physical experience of galloping on horseback—especially in armor—and the tremendous momentum of such a charge.

To be “horsed” is the natural state of Malory's knight. In the tale's first pages, we hear that two knights “rode forth well horsed and well i-armed and as the gyse was that tyme” (20.33-34). In narratives of war, Malory's chief concern seems to be whether his knights are safely on horses' backs or not; humorously long and repetitive passages describe horses being passed from knight to knight, and those who are “on foote” are described as “in grete perell of dethe, that were fowle defoyled undir the horse feete”

³⁹ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “riden,” Oxford University Press, last modified June 2010, <http://www.oed.com>.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *The Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. “riden,” April 24, 2013, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med>.

(29.4-6). One passage in particular is representative of Malory's style and indicative of the importance of having a horse: the young Arthur "toke the horse by the reygne and led hym unto Ulphuns and seyde, 'Have this horse, myne olde frende, for grete nede hast thou of an horse'" (29.8-11). In war the concern is safety, but in the quest (in other words, the majority of the *Morte*) the lack of a horse is equally dire because of the inability to travel that it implies. At the first appearance of King Pellinore in the forest—immediately following the first appearance of the Questing Beast, one of Malory's greatest symbols of perpetual motion—he comes clanking on foot, in armor, and cries out, "'sir, I have folowed that beste longe and kylde myne horse, so wolde God I had another to folow my queste'" (42.25-26). Arthur agrees to give him his own horse only over his dead—or unhorsed and defeated, as the case will be—body.

The supreme importance of the horse to the knight highlights the irresistibility of their impulse to move when they are willing to kill their horses underneath them in the chase.⁴² The absence of a knight's horse is a source, or a sign, of great sorrow. To emphasize Tristram's ("the tearful one") poignant grief and abandonment of his past life, Malory narrates that he "put hys horse frome hym and unlaced hys armour, and so he yeode unto the wyldirnes and braste downe the treys and bowis" (496.7-9). After this, his running on foot, and its wrongness, is emphasized. Later, to demonstrate the devastation Tristram causes to a group of knights, Malory provides the detail: "and their horsys ran into the feldys and forestes" (560.33). The intensity of the need for a horse is especially

⁴² In the hunt that begins the adventure of "Arthur and Accolon," for example, we hear that the three knights "were well horsed, and so they chaced so faste that within a whyle they three were more than ten myle from her felyshep. And at the laste they chaced so sore that they slewe hir horsis undirnethe them; and the horses were so fre that they felle downe dede" (137.4-8).

great during the Grail Quest. When Percival's horse is killed, "he made grete sorrow that hys hors was away," and Galahad's coldness is emphasized through his unwillingness to wait and help him find a horse, leaving Perceval to chase futilely "aftir hym on foote, crying" (909.31-32, 910.2-3). A passing yeoman observes to the forlorn knight, "I am right hevvy for you, for a good horse wolde beseme you well" (910.15-16). His unhorsed state causes him to throw away his shield, helm and sword, and launches him into lamentation, crying in a rare moment of self-examination, "'now am I a verry wreche, cursed and moste unhappy of all other knyghtes!'" (911.15-16). Still more revealingly, when a woman who sees him in this state asks him what he is doing, he replies: "'I do nother good nother grete ille'" (911.22). This is the plight of the knight without a horse: to be doing nothing, a condition that, for the knight errant whose existence is movement, is a kind of living death.

Lancelot, too, experiences this horseless stasis in the Grail Quest. Gawain's earthliness is emphasized through his unwillingness to stop and do penance for his sins,⁴³ but Lancelot is similarly focused on material concerns. After his rebuke, which essentially amounts to a command from God to continue his wandering,⁴⁴ Lancelot only agrees to "abyde" and do penance "for," as he says, "I have nother helme, horse, ne swerde" (899.7-8). His depression is more poignant for its evocation of these material elements that constitute his existence as a knight errant, and Lancelot's repentance comes

⁴³ "'Nay,' seyde sir Gawayne, 'I may do no penance, for we knyghtes adventures many tymes suffir grete woo and payne'" (892.19-20).

⁴⁴ "'Ryght so harde he a voyse that seyde, 'sir Launcelot, more harder than ys the stone, and more bitter than ys the woode, and more naked and barer than ys the lyeff of the fygge-tre! Therefore go thou from hens, and withdraw the from thys holy places!' And whan Sir Launcelot herde thys he was passing hevvy and wyst nat what to do. And so departed sore wepyng and cursed the tyme that he was bore" (895.25-31).

only after the promise that the “good man” will help him find a horse (899.9-10). In these passages, we see that a knight’s horse, or his lack of a horse, is profoundly linked to his will as well as his ability to move. Lancelot’s words in an earlier quest, ““damesell, I am redy to go with you where ye woll have me, but I have no horse,”” explicitly juxtapose the will to go and the material need for the means to do so (267.5-6). It is Balin, however, who is granted the words that summarize this connection best: “but traveillynge men are ofte wery and their horses to, but though my hors be wery my hert is not wery” (88.25-27). The knight’s heart and the horse’s body are essentially connected and together constitute a mobile force. Furthermore, the power of the knight’s impulse to move is emphasized through contrast with the strength of the horse—represented as a superlative traveler, but weak in comparison to the will of the knight errant. The state of being unhorsed, similar in seriousness to a debilitating wound or imprisonment, is nearly the only force that will cause Malory’s characters to pause, and for many, the impulse to go is so great that they will overcome even this unnatural condition.

The alleged reasons given for these impulses to quest often seem either slim or non-existent. Sir Torre, at the wedding feast of Arthur and Guinevere, in response to the dog running into court and being carried out again, agrees to “take the adventure” and rides in quest of it tirelessly and with great violence (102-3). Although adventures are sometimes grave matters, they are also instigated over subjects of mild curiosity, and these are quested after no less fiercely than those that involve matters of life and death. This dynamic is revealed still more in the passages that provide no “reason” at all, other than adventuring—or, movement—itself. Although this applies to the majority of

Malory's knights, it is Lancelot—the knight who, since Chrétien, has been depicted as so relentlessly active that he will take on the shame of riding in a cart to keep moving on his quest—who embodies the directionless impulse to go most explicitly. Within the first twenty lines of *A Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot du Lake*, this impulse is narrated in wonderfully stark, direct Malorian style:

Thus sir Launcelot rested hym longe with play and game; and than he thought hymself to preve in straunge adventures, and bade his newew, sir Lyonell, for to make hym redy, 'for we muste go seke adventures'. So they mounted on their horses, armed at all ryghtes, and rode into a depe foreste and so into a playne. (253.20-25)

This passage is important for an understanding of Malory's motion for a number of reasons. First, it narrates the typological *locus* of movement, the aimless entry into the "depe foreste," to be explored further in the following pages. Second, it strips the impulse to quest down to its most basic core—a kernel that is the true cause of the majority of Malory's knights' journeys—he "thought himself" to go. Finally, it reveals an almost didactic process that is also present implicitly in other sections of *Le Morte*. Lancelot, for whom even "rest[ing] long" involves the violence and speed of jousting,⁴⁵ teaches a young knight (his nephew, an important mentoring and guarding relationship in the Middle Ages)⁴⁶ what a knight "must" do. Why should we get our arms and horses and prepare to leave? For one evocatively simple reason: "we muste go seke adventures."

⁴⁵ "But in especiall hit was prevyd on sir Launcelot de Lake, for in all turnementes, justys, and dedys of armys, both for lyff and deth, he passed all other knyghtes, and at no tyme was he ovircom but yf hit were by treson other inchauntement [...] Thus sir Launcelot rested hym longe with play and game" (253.7-12, 20).

⁴⁶ The most notable example of this in medieval literature is, of course, the relationship between Arthur and Gawain, his nephew, given significant importance in *Le Morte Darthur* and the majority of the Gawain-romances, including *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

This is, in a sense, Malory's (often unappreciated) genius: to concentrate the flowery and the meditative into the active and the intuitive. In Malory's hands, questing becomes a basic impulse: part of what it means to exist, requiring no more explanation than "we must go." As this adventure continues, questing without an object or direction develops as Lancelot and Lyonell ride through the forest asking people they meet if they have seen any adventures. Ector, too, who allegedly rides from court to seek Lancelot, rather than inquiring after Lancelot himself, asks the first person he encounters, "'fayre fellow [...] doste thou know this contrey or ony adventures that bene here nyghe hond?'" (254.32-33). The questing of these knights, as is true of the majority of quests in *Le Morte Darthur*, could not be less linear: it is adventuring for adventuring's sake, a wandering trajectory with no defined destination.

In the fourth book, *The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney* (perhaps Malory's most original work),⁴⁷ the entire court asks a question "all at onys": "where [may we] fynde sir Bewmaynes?" (337.33-35). Sir Ironsyde, also known as the Red Knight, directs his answer about the title hero to King Arthur: "'fayre lorde,' sayde Ironsyde, 'I can nat telle you, for hit is fulle harde to fynde hym: for such yonge knyghtes as he is, whan they be in their adventures, bene never abydyng in no place'" (337.36-338.3). His words, mirroring Sir Ulfius' answer to the king's identical question about Merlin, encapsulate Malory's setting—which seems to be both "no place" and all places converging at the same time—

⁴⁷ *The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney that was called Bewmaynes* is generally considered either Malory's original composition, a version of a lost source, or (as Arnold Sanders argues) an impressively creative synthesis of wide-ranging generic tropes. Arnold writes, "I know of no surviving evidence of another post-Chaucerian Middle English author capable of such a recombinative narrative synthesis. If this toying with conventions in 'The Tale of Sir Gareth' is truly evidence of 'Malory's Originality,' then it demonstrates that Malory composed it with authority." Arnold Sanders, "Sir Gareth and the 'Unfair Unknown': Malory's Use of the Gawain Romances," *Arthuriana* 16, no. 1 (2006): 41.

and the ceaseless movement of his characters, by no means reserved for “such yonge knyghtes,” although this category includes the vast majority of his protagonists. His words also hearken back to nearly identical claims in the earlier metrical romances, especially *Ywain and Gawain*. For all its vast scope, the refusal to “abide”—the negative expression of narrative movement—is no less universal in *Le Morte Darthur*.

Malory’s narrator provides reasons for these refusals to stand still with varying degrees of specificity; when there is a cause, it is almost always a quest. Sir Torre, for example, refuses to stop, with the words, “‘I may nat tarry [...] for I am in a queste that I muste nedys folow’” (109.17-18). In the context of war, while the young Arthur’s kingdom is in a state of unrest, he swears that he will “‘never reste tyll [he] mete[s] with tho kyngis in a fayre felde,’” and “‘by no meane wolde abyde’” (127.2-3, 11-12). In a conversation during a kind of dark quest against Arthur, Morgan expresses a similar impatience: “‘ye may abyde,’ seyde the quene, ‘tyll youre brother the kynge com home.’ ‘I may nat, madame,’ seyde Morgan le Fay, ‘for I have such hasty tydynges’” (150.6-9). Hand-to-hand combat is also an occasion for the narrator to express this impulse, as in the case of Sir Blamour, who “‘was so hasty that he wolde have no reste’” (409.18). Asking her father’s permission to “ryde and seke” Lancelot (and her brother, Lavayne), Elayne swears that she shall “‘never stynte tyll that [she] fynde[s] hym’” (1079.34-35). Lancelot himself, who, despite his terseness, is perhaps the most meditative of Malory’s knights, provides the most thoughtful expression of the refusal to stop—in this case, to marry:

‘But for to by a weddyd man, I thynke hit nat, for than I muste couche with hir and leve armys and turnamentis, batellys and adventures.’ [...] And so sir Launcelot and she departed. And than he rode into a depe foreste two dayes and more, and had strayte lodgyng. (270.29-271.7)

Malory's book is concerned with ranking—to which the striking red-lettering of names in the Winchester Manuscript contributes—and the greatness of his knights corresponds to the frequency and emphasis of their refusals to abide. In addition to Lancelot, Galahad—who is nearly inhuman in his drive—Tristram, and Perceval are notable among these, and comprise the highest echelon of knighthood in *Le Morte*. Percival, for example, refuses even Tristram's request that he “abyde in this marchis” until they can ride together, responding: “‘nay, [...] in thes contreyes I may nat tary, for I muste nedis into Wales” (679.9-11). Tristram, in his turn, is resistant to Arthur's command that he “abyde in [his] courte”: “‘sir,’ seyde sir Trystram, ‘thereto me is lothe, for I have to do in many contreys” (572.4-6).

These temptations to stop, which, as Benjamin writes about the modern wanderer, seem ever easier for the knights to resist, are nearly as omnipresent in the text as narrations of movement itself. The prevalence and persistence of these obstacles suggest that the true battle during the majority of the *Morte* is the struggle to keep moving—to maintain the ability to move freely on the roads and forested paths. These hurdles occasionally take the form of a woman's desire to get married, a king's command, or a fellow knight errant, but typically they are more vague and mysterious: knights who represent the antithesis of errantry by standing still and blocking the way, their appearance in the text usually coupled with the springing up of tents or pavilions.⁴⁸ This kind of obstacle forms the first “adventure” of the hundreds in *Le Morte*—explicitly

⁴⁸ Pavilions are fascinating objects in *Le Morte Darthur*, almost always pitched by anti-knights, almost never by knights errant. It is as if the establishment of even these temporary homes in the profoundly mobile space of the forest is an affront to the work's ceaseless narrative movement, symbolic of the anti-knights who prevent travel and therefore need to be confronted and defeated.

called the “adventure at the passagis” as it is retold—in which the protagonists are met by anti-knights at a point of spatial narrowing—“at a strayte passage”—and refused their request “that they myght passe” (20.36-21.1). Another early adventure begins with the news of “a knight in the foreste that had rered up a pavylon by a welle”—a seemingly random event until it becomes clear that it will be repeated with little variation numerous times, becoming a major structural element of the work (46.18-19). When a knight sets up such a dwelling in the mobile space of the forest, it is contrary to the free movement of the knights errant, and so almost invariably indicates danger.

The typical word of challenge used by these knights is also revealing: in one example, ““abyde, knyght! for ells ye shall abyde whethir ye woll other no”” (68.22-23). The violence that always results from such a challenge indicates the fierceness with which the Malory’s knights defend their right to journey. An event in Sir Torre’s minor adventure “for the brachet” is exemplary of this rhythmic narrative pattern. “As he rode he mette with a dwarf suddeynly,” who declares:

‘For thou shalt nat passe thys way but if thou juste with yondir knyghtes of the pavilions.’ Than was sir Torre ware where were two pavilions, and grete sperys stood oute, and two shildes hangynge on treys by the pavilions. ‘I may nat tarry,’ seyde sir Torre ‘for I am in a queste that I muste nedys folow.’ ‘Thou shalt nat passe thys wey,’ seyde the dwarff, and therewithall he blew hys horne. Than ther com one armed on horsebacke and dressed hys shylde and com fast toward Sir Torre. (109.14-22)

Torre’s experience is typical, and the activity of such knights who prevent free movement are universally condemned, most of all by the knights errant themselves, as profoundly unchivalric. One particular challenge serves to define chivalric versus anti-chivalric behavior, delivered to knights who are setting up an ambush for Lancelot in a forest:

“‘fayre knyghtes,’ seyde sir Lamerok, ‘what do ye, hovyngre here and wacchyngre? And yff ye be knyghtes arraunte that wyll just, lo I am redy!’” (485.11-13). Lamerak’s scorn, even bewilderment, at these knights’ “hovyngre” and “wacchyngre” is palpable; questing and jousting are so ingrained in his nature that this kind of stasis and entrapment are completely alien to him, as his words imply that they are contrary to the identity of all “knyghtes arraunte.” Indeed, free movement is a primary concern in the text for characters who are not knights as well, as is evidenced by an earl whose lands are plagued by a murderous giant, and whose chief concern is that his people “durste nowhere ryde” (175.25). Elsewhere in the text, a woman asks Sir Balin to challenge a knight who “kepeth an iland” and prevents any travellers from passing; he takes the adventure, agreeing that it is “an unhappy customme” (88.19-21). The question “‘why sholde I nat ryde this way?’” is understood as rhetorical—there is no just reason to prevent passage in Malory’s world (271.12).

A final example of this dynamic can be taken from one of Malory’s most famous episodes. The fact that entrapment and other means of preventing free motion is so contrary to the values of *Le Morte Darthur* can help us understand Malory’s sympathetic representation of Lancelot, even as he is caught in Guinevere’s bedchamber—despite the profound destruction his actions cause. Unarmed and outnumbered by the knights who block the hallway outside of the queen’s rooms, Lancelot shouts defiance at Sir Agravaire: “‘ye shall nat preson me thys nyght!’” (1167.34). Prepared by hundreds of preceding pages, this cry resonates with a reader; Malory’s sprawling book has shown that a knight should never stop moving, and above all, should never be prevented from

doing so. The extent to which Sir Thomas Malory, “knight prisoner,” who prays in writing “that God sende hym good delyveraunce sone and hastely,” identified with this cry of defiance as he wrote it can only be guessed (363.19-20). Whatever his thoughts during composition, it is perfectly fitting that a text that seems to value free movement above all, especially the wanderings of knights errant, should come from this man whose few autobiographical words are clearly preoccupied with his own identity as a knight and his inability to ride with his imagined characters.

“AS HIT HAD BENE THUNDIR”:⁴⁹ MOTION AS MARVEL

In the earlier texts of this study, we have seen, beginning with the thunderous arrival of the eagle in Chaucer’s *House of Fame*, that movement is not merely prevalent, but constitutive of an aesthetic—a source of wonder and beauty. Although Malory’s aesthetic is dramatically different from Chaucer’s, they are related through mobility and through their preoccupation with the drama of motion. From the moment Arthur “handled the sword by the handels, and lightly and fiersly pulled it out of the stone,” movement—and especially speed and force—is an object of wonder in *Le Morte Darthur* (13.24-25). As it is called in relation to the young Arthur’s careening through the forest on horseback, motion is a “fyne force”—elegant, artful, and communicative of skill as well as power. I contend that this is true most of all of the elaborate network of spaces created by the knights’ interlacing journeys, but it is most explicit in narratives of battle and jousting. In a work of such famously few words and stark, concise language, the sheer quantity of

⁴⁹ “Than in grete wretth they departed their horsis and com togydys as hit had bene thundir, and the Blak Knyghtes speare brake, and Beawmaynes threste hym thorow bothe sydis” (304.12-16).

adjectives, adverbs, and verbs of action and speed, especially in these sections, is worth notice.

In the journeys, speed is constantly superlative; a high percentage of all the characters' movements across space are accomplished "in all the haste that they myght" (22.13).⁵⁰ In consequence, the narrative takes on the form of ceaseless, multidirectional rushing. Narratives of battle, especially single combat, are similarly superlative and constitutive of the work's pacing. *The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney that was Called Bewmaynes* is an appropriate example through which to approach this larger trend, and one in which Malory's fingerprints as an author are clearly visible. A short book and perhaps the most formulaic and rigidly structured of all, Sir Gareth's tale is organized around a single quest involving increasingly difficult battles against knights defined by the colors of their arms and the spaces in which they are encountered: first black, then green, then red, then "the coloure of inde" (blue/indigo), and finally "the Rede Knyght of the Rede Laundis." The battle with the Blak Knyght is already one of speed, power, and ferocity:

Than in grete wretth they departed their horsis and com togydyrs as hit had bene thundir, and the Blak Knyghtes speare brake, and Beawmaynes threste hym thorow bothe sydis. And therewith his speare brake and the truncheon was left

⁵⁰ Before one of the early battles, Malory also narrates, "the men of warre made hem redy in all haste possible" (24.22-23). After his encounter with King Pellinore and the Questing Beast, Arthur commands his men to "fecche another horse as faste as they might" (43.19-20). Balin, taking an adventure, cries: "I woll hyghe me in all the haste that I may to mete with kyng Royns and destroy him, other ellis to dye therefore" (66.32-34). Men and women are always pushing horses to the limit of their speed and beyond, as is the case in the same tale with "a damesel that com rydyng full faste as the horse might dryve" (69.18-19). In the second book the knights mount their horses and "com to a grene wood" "in all haste," and in Book Three the first adventure arrives with three knights, "rydyng, as faste fleyng as they might ryde" (206.15-16, 254.3-4). Much later, Sir Percival and Sir Parsydes witness the approach of a knight riding out of a castle "as faste as ever he myght flyng" (813.24-25). Finally, Lancelot—most mobile of all—"rode as faste as he myght, and the booke seyth he toke the watir at Westmynster Brydye and made hys horse swymme over the Temmys unto Lambyth" (1125.15-17).

style in his syde. But nevirtheles the Blak Knyght drew his swerde and smote many egir strokeys of grete myght, and hurte Bewmaynes full sore. But at the laste the Blak Knyght, within an owre and an half, he felle downe of his horse in a sowne and there dyed.(304.13-21)

The phrase “as it had bene thundir” is a rare image in a book of direct narration, and it is devoted to speed and force, and will be repeated. In the battle with the Grene Knyght, after a mighty rush and the breaking of spears, the two warriors “russhed togydyrs lyke two myghty kempys [champions] a longe whyle, and sore they bledde bothe,” until Gareth’s shield is “clovyn asunder” and he gives his opponent “suche a buffette uppon the helme that he felle on his kneis” (305.34-36, 306.7-8).

In the subsequent battle against the first red knight, the diction and imagery of combat is intensified and its narrative is lengthened. After they “cam togydir all that they myght dryve” and their horses both crash to the earth, the knights “drew their swerdys, and eythir gaff other sad strokys now here now there, trasyng, traversyng, and foynyng, rasyng and hurlynge lyke two borys, the space of two owrys”; “the bloode ran downe to the grounde, that hit was wonder to see that stronge batayle” (309.24-35). Here, Malory uses amplification to a surprising extent, introducing rare imagery and revealing that his most extensive vocabulary is in participles of motion—specifically the actions of battle. “Trasyng” is a particularly interesting repeated participle in these narratives of combat, as one primary fifteenth-century definition of “trase” is “to take one’s course” or generally “to go,” another is “to pace or step in dancing,” and still another is “to plait, twine, interweave, braid.”⁵¹ Multiple connotations may be operative in Malory’s use of the word, suggesting rapid, multidirectional, interweaving, dance-like motion. The two

⁵¹ Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “trace,” June 2010, www.oed.com.

knights engage in an intensely violent dance, darting and leaping in all directions (although these words do not improve on Malory's own extensive supply), in sharp contrast to the tank-like mutual beatings in which Malory's platemail-clad combatants are often imagined engaging. Gareth's battle with Sir Persaunt of Inde is still more superlative, however, and the combat with his fiercest opponent, the Rede Knyght of the Rede Laundis, stretches for sixty lines, more than double the space given to the previous encounters. This epic battle is not a single flurry of motion, but intermingled with and emphasized through rhythmic moments of stillness, in which the sound of their blows can almost be heard echoing against the nearby castle walls. After the first explosive charge, "they lay a grete whyle sore astoned, that all that were in the castell and in the sege wente their neckys had bene broste"; similarly, after they recover and "ran togydyrs lyke two fers lyons," they "reled backwarde bothe two stredys" (322.28-323.13). Malory narrates:

And than thus they fought tyll hit was paste none, and never wolde stynte tyll at the laste they lacked wynde bothe, and than they stode waggynge, stagerynge, pantynge, blowynge, and bledynge, that all that beheld them for the moste party wepte for pyté. So whan they had rested them a whyle they yode to batayle agayne, trasyng, traversynge, foyngne, and rasyng as two borys. And at som tyme they toke their bere as hit had bene two rammys and horled togydyrs, that sometyme they felle grovelynge to the erthe; and at som tyme they were so amated that ayther toke others swerde in the stede of his owne. (323.7-17)

In the progression constituted by Malory's artful narrations of battle, we experience acceleration. Like the rhythmic recurrences of the adventure of the basin and the storm in *Ywain and Gawain*, a similar event is repeated, but with increasing intensity and speed with each repetition. Whereas the poet of the earlier romance *decreases* the length of narrative, however, Malory expands it, dramatizing chaotic and violent motion through amplification. Malory's vocabulary of battle is certainly formulaic, however, and as such

its aesthetic effects are often disregarded. Rosamund Allen, in a recent essay based on her experience with The Chaucer Studio's Malory recording project, convincingly argues that this misunderstanding of the power of such narrations in *Le Morte* is a symptom of the modern practice of silent reading, which she contends is contrary to Malory's intentions and expectations. Referring to Malory's "paratactic" style, she writes:

Field considers that it is a limited style, and students often get impatient with it. Worse, the silent reader, looking for dramatic exchange and novel imagery, may skip the battles, thus totally misreading the text. But when, as an example, the battle between Palomides and the two brothers Helys and Helake is read aloud, the excitement is palpable. The breathless pace constructed from the succession of verbs of movement and force, the brutalities committed [...] and the tension generated are extremely effective.⁵²

This has been borne out in my own experiences of reading and listening to Malory read aloud, especially in a dramatic performance of a faithful adaptation of the text by the Royal Shakespeare Company.⁵³ But such an understanding and appreciation of *Le Morte* can also be achieved in silent reading—as some contemporary readers would have experienced the book—if one shifts one's focus from "novel imagery" to the choice and rhythmic employment of formulae.⁵⁴ The acceleration created by narratives of movement

⁵² Allen, "Reading Malory Aloud: Syntax, Gender, and Narrative Pace," 76.

⁵³ I refer to a performance of the work by the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford-upon-Avon in June 2010—an adaptation, abridged but relatively true to Malory's text, by Mike Poulton, *Morte D'Arthur: The Legend of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table*. This production communicated the resonance of Malory's syntax from the first words; formulae and parataxis, often read as flat on the page, took on the character of an incantation, communicating the magical separation from the present of Malory's Arthurian world, dialogue revealing itself as clearly dynamic. Impressive performance aside, the potential for such resonance is already present in Malory's text on the page, not merely manufactured out of it through adaptation. Gregory Doran, *Morte D'Arthur: The Legend of King Arthur and His Knights of the Round Table* (Stratford-upon-Avon, U. K., 2010).

⁵⁴ As Allen observes, "it matters not that these very phrases have been used in countless other one-on-one combats in *Le Morte Darthur*—rather the reverse: in the context of a shared experience of listening, this very familiarity creates a collective response." Allen, "Reading Malory Aloud: Syntax, Gender, and Narrative Pace," 77.

in combat, such as in Sir Gareth's tale, and the unique rhythms within the episodes, create an impressive experience of momentum.

Finally, it is clear that Malory *intends* for us to wonder at the "fyne force" of such combatants: to stand in awe of the movements of horses and men in harmony creating a sort of ordered chaos (ordered insofar as the rhythms of battle are prescribed by the rules of knighthood). For the first time in *Le Morte*, we see Malory use the words "wonder" and "marvel" as he describes the motions of knightly combat: Palomides and Helyor, for example, "laysshed togydyrs wonder fyersly" (772.7). As is very rarely true of Malory's language, explosive and fiery imagery illuminates the text where horses and knights rush together: Gawain and Lancelot collide "as thundir"; when Sir Tristram and Sir Elyas trace and traverse, "hit semed a flamynge fyre aboute them" (1219.28, 625.7-8). This is true in particular when the rush is "with grete raundom."

The word "raundom" (also "rawndom" or "random") deserves sustained attention because of its prominence in Malory's text as a descriptor of motion, its importance in modern English form as a keyword in this dissertation, and its evolution of meaning over the centuries. Its primary fourteenth- and fifteenth-century definition is "impetuosity, great speed, force, or violence (in riding, running, striking, etc.); chiefly in 'with (also in) great random.' Also (with indefinite article): an impetuous rush, a rapid headlong course."⁵⁵ According to the *OED*, there are no confirmed uses of "random" as an adjective with its modern definition until the middle of the sixteenth century. I argue, however, that there does not seem to be a sharp divide between these definitions. During

⁵⁵ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. "random," December 2008, www.oed.com

Malory's time it was also a sporting term, used in falconry to describe taking prey on the wing, and it seems to have been beginning to be used in jousting to describe a joust with no separating barrier between the combatants.⁵⁶ In this case, "random" has the connotations of "untethered," "uncontained," the state of being without orderly, linear constraints. These meanings reveal the early development of "random" into a word that signifies chance, accident, haphazardness, and the lack of an ordering system. The speed and force implied in the term's primary definition clearly relate to Malory's employment and depiction of motion, but so do its connotations of being motion that is "headlong" and "uncontained." This prominent descriptor of the motion of Malory's knights implies compulsiveness, acceleration, and even, to a degree, randomization.

In addition to this, as the knights let go and charge in this way, it is, for Malory, a *wonder*; in one example he allows this to be explicit: "than was he ware of another knight commynge with grete rawndom, and eche of hem dressed to other, that mervayle hit was to se" (109.28-30). For Malory's characters and in his narration, speed, or force, is a marvel, a source of amazement and an object of beauty. Movement in *Le Morte Darthur*, therefore, is more than simply omnipresent, for its importance is not merely in the constant rushing of the characters, but in the characters' and the narrator's brief aesthetic meditations upon movement itself—one of the only elements that manifests itself as worthy of frequent and explicit attention in a text of straightforward narration.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

“AND HE RODE INTO A DEPE FOREST”⁵⁷

Many Malory scholars seem to agree that the writer was not interested in setting or landscape, and that his descriptions of space are either absent or not worth our attention. Andrew Lynch, who is truly insightful about the scenes of combat described above, writes that “brief descriptions of terrain are barely present for themselves, but act as markers between one episode and the next. Knights ride through these empty spaces (mainly forests) only in order to be present at the next combat.”⁵⁸ P. J. C. Field has written numerous essays about places and place-names in *Le Morte Darthur*, but focuses on their relationship to historical places and events, generally without attention to their role as landscape or setting.⁵⁹ Even Dhira B. Mahoney, who agrees that it is “widely acknowledged that Malory shows little interest in visualizing [...] topographical and architectural spaces,” and in response to this works toward a new understanding of space in Malory, only addresses the narrative importance of the interior space of the bedroom.⁶⁰ Mark Lambert provides a brief but careful study of Malory’s use of landscape and setting in relation to his sources, and concludes that Malory

[...] basically prefers action to description, deeds to setting. His reduction of landscape, as a study of the two ‘Percival on the Island’ episodes would lead one to suspect, is especially striking [...] Occasionally in the French romances we find set piece descriptions, moments where the author devotes a page or so to the

⁵⁷ See note 65.

⁵⁸ Lynch, *Malory’s Book of Arms: The Narrative of Combat in Le Morte Darthur*, 46.

⁵⁹ See P. J. C. Field, “Malory’s Place-Names: Westminster Bridge and Virvyn,” *Notes and Queries* (1987) and “Malory’s Place-Names: Roone and the Low Country,” *Notes and Queries* (1985).

⁶⁰ Mahoney, “Symbolic Uses of Space in Malory’s *Morte Darthur*,” 95.

features of a new and interesting landscape. Such set pieces, which tend to interrupt the sequence of chivalric actions, are not to Malory's taste.⁶¹

He goes on to show examples in which Malory has kept the action of episodes in his sources but not the setting, "omitting the forest itself."⁶² Lambert is certainly correct that Malory is uninterested in this kind of "set piece" landscape description, and that the *Vulgate Cycle* includes a higher degree of detail in its depictions of setting, although greater detail should be expected when comparing passages simply because of the much greater length of the earlier French cycle of works. He is also correct about Malory's interest in action, as the above sections have highlighted. And yet, numerous passages in *Le Morte*, including the following, suggest that there is something missing in this frequent dismissal of the aesthetic and structural importance of Malory's forest:

But syr Launcelot rode overthwarte and endelonge a wylde foreyst and hylde no patthe but as wylde adventure lad hym. And at the last he com to a stony crosse whych departed two wayes in waste londe, and by the crosse was a stone that was a marble, but hit was so durke that sir Launcelot myght nat wete what hyt was. (893.23-28)

Based on passages such as this, I contend that it is a mistake to separate "action" from "setting" in *Le Morte Darthur*. Lefebvre and other postmodern theorists suggest that it is in the nature of space to be produced by activity, not merely to be a vacuum in which action occurs, and this is true of Malory's world.⁶³ There is something too great, deep, evocative, and essential to *Le Morte* about the forest to dismiss it easily. As Corinne

⁶¹ Lambert, *Malory: Style and Vision in Le Morte Darthur*, 78-79. Lambert also cites earlier, foundational scholarship that helped to establish this: M. C. Bradbrook, "Introduction," in *Le Morte Darthur*, ed. M. C. Bradbrook (London: 1958), 22-23.

⁶² Lambert, *Malory: Style and Vision in Le Morte Darthur*, 82.

⁶³ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*.

Saunders suggests, “perhaps it is Malory’s perilous forest of adventure that we recollect most of all,”⁶⁴ and it is not merely sentimentality that renders it so memorable, but Malory’s unique production and organization of space. Through the constant, multidirectional movements of characters described above, Malory builds on the forested space of earlier romances to produce a single vast expanse that encompasses his entire work and endows it with surprising continuity—considering its multi-layered textual *mouvance*—and a narrative power that the description of action alone would not produce.

First, Malory’s forest is indeed everywhere, and it must be the simplicity of references to it that have caused many readers to dismiss it, not its lack of presence in the text. And yet, we have seen in descriptions of battle how Malory’s use of rhythm, repetition, and formula can be dynamic: the same is true of narratives of passages into and within the forest. In fact, Malory gives us almost as many references to *riding into the forest* as he does of *riding*. If there is any single, rhythmic line that expresses the structure, energy, and aesthetic of *Le Morte Darthur*, it may be the phrase—often repeated with only minor variation: “and he rode into a depe forest.”⁶⁵ This constant

⁶⁴ Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 163.

⁶⁵ In the first book, an episode is introduced with the words, “so Balyne and the damesell rode into the foreyste” (80.26). Shortly after, Balin finally finds the adventure he had been seeking when he “com into a fayre foreyst in a valey” (86.9-10). An adventure of King Pellinore begins “as he rode in a foreyste,” and the adventure of Arthur and Accolon commences with the words, “than hit befelle that Arthure and many of his knyghtes rode on huntyng into a grete foreste” (114.12, 137.1-2). In the first mention of this designation for the setting, we hear that “on the morne they rode all in same to the foreste of adventures” (163.35-36). Sir Marhaute and a damsel “come into a depe foreste” (172.33-34). Lancelot’s quests are frequently introduced with this line, as in “so they mounted on their horses, armed at all ryghtes, and rode into a depe foreste,” “as he had redyn longe in a grete foreste,” “he rode into a grete foreste all that day, and never coude fynde no hygheway,” “and than he rode in a depe foreste two dayes and more, and had strayte lodgyng,” “so sir Launcelotte rode into a depe foreste,” and “now leve we there and speke we of sir Launcelot that rode a grete whyle in a depe foreste” (253.23-25, 254.34, 259.20-21, 271.5-7, 277.4, 278.18-19). In *The Book of Tristrame de Lyones*, he and Palomides “amowntid upon their horsys and rode togydrys unto the foreyste,” and Tristram later “rode into the foreyste up and downe” (563.1-2, 780.6-7). *The Tale of*

riding constitutes the first of two major roles of Malory's forest. (1) Like a whirlpool, maelstrom, or a vast object in space, the forest has a gravitational pull that bends space and time and inexorably draws characters into its shade. Whenever they set out, which is constantly, they almost invariably find themselves riding into the forest (see note 65). The forest then (2) *perpetuates and randomizes movement*, through seemingly haphazard *aventure*, becoming a space of eternal wandering. In this way, the impulse to move and the space of the forest exert force on one another, the space shaping trajectories of movement—pulling them within itself and then scattering and bending them into a self-perpetuating, tangled mass of trajectories—and the motion shaping space, endowing it with its convoluted form. Together, they give *Le Morte Darthur* its unique character: the character that makes Malory's forest and his interlacing adventures resonate in our imaginations even today.

Indeed, the amazing frequency with which travel brings people into the forest in *Le Morte* testifies to some kind of narrative pull into this space. Certain passages in particular, however, come closer to making this draw explicit, and the phrase Malory uses to describe it is “by adventure.” This phrase can mean “at random,” of course, but this “randomness” always bends toward the forest. At the opening of one of Lancelot's adventures, for example, we are told: “and so he departed, and by adventure he com into the same foreste there he was takyng his slepe before; and in the myddys of an hygheway he mette a damsel rydyng on a whyght palfray” (264.6-9). As soon as

the Sangreal includes more frequent entrances into the forest, such as that of Sir Melyas de Lyle, who “rode [...] into an olde foreyste” (884.4). Finally, after the disaster of Arthur's world, Lancelot's response is narrated: “and syr Launcelot awok, and went and took his hors, and rode al that day and al nyght in a forest, wepyng” (1254.1-2).

Lancelot begins to move again—after pausing only long enough to speak two lines—the forest (“by adventure”) draws him back in, to the same place as before. Again, “by adventure,” he meets a woman—fittingly in the mobile space of “the myddys of an hygheway,” reminiscent of the variety of the highly mobile points at spatial crossroads in Middle English literature, such as Chaucer’s House of Rumor—which begins another quest and perpetuates his movement under the trees. The forest bends Lancelot’s trajectory into a loop and then continues to twist it, shaping it even as it ensures that movement will continue. Elsewhere, in the same kind of movement, Palomydes “departed and rode as adventures wolde gyde hym”; the place to which “adventures” guide him is “a foreyste by a well” (769.9-11). Another phrase that often subtly indicates the pull toward the forest is the indefinite “and then it befell,” as in the passage (mentioned earlier): “than hit befelle that Arthure and many of his knyghtes rode on huntynge into a grete foreste” (137.1-2). Consistent with this schema, the next sentence narrates: “and hit happed kynge Arthure and kynge Uryence and sir Accalon of Gawle followed a grete harte; for they three were well horsed, and so they chaced so faste that within a whyle they three were more than ten myle from her felyshep” (137.1-6). The forest draws them in and sets them in rapid motion, in this case (as with many others) getting them quickly lost as they race under the trees without attention to distance or location, if stable landmarks even exist in the Forest of Adventures.

Elsewhere in the text, these narratives are simpler, but no less consistent. During the Grail Quest, a line appears that Vinaver’s edition gives its own paragraph: “than

departed they and wente into a foreyste” (1005.19).⁶⁶ In *The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere*, Lancelot merely chooses to ride *away*, and it predictably brings him to the forest: “and therewithall he groned pyteously and rode a grete walop awaywarde from them untyll he cam undir a woodys evyse” (1073.27-29). One *aventure* in the stories of Sir Tristram, during which he sets sail in a “lytyll vessell” with another knight, a woman, and a squire, enacts the narrative bending of space toward the forest in particularly explicit form, replacing “by adventure” with the force of “contraryus wynde”:

So whan they were in the see a contraryus wynde blew them unto the costis of North Walis, ny the Foreyste Perelus. Than seyde sir Trystrames, ‘Here shall ye abyde me thes ten dayes, and Governayle, my squyer, with you. And if I com nat agayne by that day, take the nexte way into Cornwayle, for in thys foreyste are many strange adventures, as I have harde sey, and som of hem I caste to preve or that I departe.’ (481.17-24)

This short narrative represents both elements of the narrative trajectory: the gravitational pull of the forest (represented by the wind) and the impulse of the knight (Tristram’s intention to enter the forest). In *Le Morte Darthur*, the wind would blow the ship nowhere else but to the Forest Perilous, and the knight would never choose not to enter it.

As in the other examples, immediately after Tristram’s entry into the “Foreyste Perelus,” the second aspect of the forest’s movement begins: it maintains, accelerates, and bends his trajectory, “by adventure.” As is often the case, after riding “within that foreyste a myle and more,” he meets “a likely knight syttyng armed by a well,” setting him off on a quest that leads him to another, and another (481.27-29). In a different part

⁶⁶ This is a modern editorial decision: such a paragraph break is not present in the Winchester Manuscript.

of the forest (separation of different forests is unclear)⁶⁷ and in a similar trajectory, as Lancelot “ran his way into the foreyste,” “by adventure he com to the cité of Corbyn where dame Elayne was” (822.19-21). These encounters that perpetuate movement always occur when one is in the forest: much earlier, it is after “Launcelot was paste oute of the courte to seke adventures” and “as [Ector] had redyn longe in a grete foreste” that “he mette with a man was lyke a foster” (254.27-31). In another profoundly interlacing adventure, after Gawain and the other knights “departed from the damesels and rode thorowe a grete foreste” they “mette wyth a messyngere” (179.8-10). Again, it is not until Balin “loked towarde a fayre foreste” that he sees “com rydyng hys brothir Balan” (70.2-4). This dynamic is consistent from close to the very beginning of *Le Morte*, when Malory narrates of Arthur that “as sone as he was in the foreste, the kynge saw a grete harte before hym” (41.34-35).

At times, especially at dark moments in the work, the perpetuation of motion within the forest is particularly dramatic. In these episodes, also characterized by heightened emotion, it becomes a space of directionless wandering. In a text of direct narration and adventures which often last as little as two or three lines, these moments of wandering are still poignantly stark and direct, but subtly yet clearly amplified. Some of

⁶⁷ In addition to ubiquitous references to forests, whether given the indefinite or definite article, these spaces are described with a variety of adjectives (“grete,” “depe,” “grene,” “fayre,” “wylde,” “olde,” “waste”) and occasionally given proper names. “The contrey and foreste of Arroy” and the “Foreyste of Sherewood” are both mentioned (162.23, 38.5). Sometimes, most evocatively, the “name” of the forest is “semi-proper,” and could either function as a proper name, a descriptor, or a designation of all of Malory’s forest, the ambiguity increased by the frequent lack of capitalization in the manuscript; for example, “the foreste of adventures” and “the Foreyste Perelus” (163.35-36, 481.18-19). These names suggest minor spatial divisions, but the narrative trajectories of movement between and through them and their consistent representation suggest that these are all names for the same semi-continuous, all-encompassing space. There is little or no symbolic or narrative difference between the different “forests,” except for possibly the “waste forest,” which is more a change to the forest for the duration of Book Six than a separate landscape.

these examples are moments of mildly evocative elaboration, such as the passage in which Sir Marhaute and “the damesel of thirty winter of ayge” “come into a depe foreste, and by fortune they were nyghted and rode longe in a depe way,” or, similarly, when Lancelot “rode into a grete foreste all that day, and never coude fynde no hygheway. And so the nyght fell on hym” (172.32-35, 259.20-21). Others, like the passage about Lancelot’s aimless rushing quoted at the beginning of this section, are surprisingly elaborate and emphatic, and this is not the only one of its kind. In his chase after the Black Knight, for example, Gareth

toke his horse and rode afftir hym all that ever he myght, thorow mores and fellys and grete sloughis, that many tymes his horse and he plunged over their hedys in depe myres, for he knewe nat the way but toke the gayneste way in that woodenesse, that many tymes he was lyke to peryshe. And at the laste hym happened to com to a fayre grene way. (329.1-7)

Similarly “wood” in the woods—like Orfeo, Ywain, Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Merlin (*silvester homo*), and a considerable list of other characters in medieval literature—Tristram “ran hys way and [a lady] wyst nat where he was becom” (496.18). At this particular point in Tristram’s tale, the word wandering—rarely used by Malory—actually appears in the text as, in his aimless rushing, Tristram “happyd” to meet “herdemmen wandrynge and langeryng” (500.1-2). When Ector, Bors, and Lyonell depart to seek Lancelot in *his* madness because they “myght nat abyde no lenger for sorow,”

they rode frome contrey to contrey, in forestes and in wyldirnessys and in wastys, and ever they leyde waycche bothe at forestes and at all maner of men as they rode to harkyn and to spare afftir hym, as he that was a naked man in his shurte wyth a swerde in hys honde. And thus they rode nyghe a quarter of a yere, longe and overtwarte. (808.23-32)

Once the knights have been drawn into the forest, it keeps them wandering under its leaves. Nowhere is this truer than during the Grail Quest, where the forest darkens, suddenly becoming the “Waste Forest.”⁶⁸ This is true of Lancelot’s riding “overthwarte and endelonge a wylde foreyste [...] as wylde adventure lad hym,” as it is of Percival and Bors, who feel the pain of wandering at least as keenly (893.23-24). In a poignant self-identification, Percival answers a “good man’s” question: ““of whense by ye?”” with the words:

‘Sir, I am of kynge Arthurs courte and a knight of the Rounde Table, whych am in the queste of the Sankgreall, and here I am in grete duras and never lyke to ascape oute of thys wyldernes.’ (914.26-31)

Bors, in the same vein, when he and Percival emerge “oute of a grete foreyste” for a moment and meet, says to the other knight: ““hit ys more than a yere and a half that I ne lay ten tymes where men dwelled, but in wylde forestis and in mownteaynes. But God was ever my comforte”” (1027.3-10).

⁶⁸ In this sixth book, the “waste forest” as well as the “old forest” appears among the familiar “depe,” “wylde,” and “grete” forests. These new environments are characterized by darkness, fear, confusion, and death. Their threatening violence is often left vague: knights simply enter the waste forest and are “slayne and destroyed”; by the end of the quest, “many knyghtes of the Rounde Table were slayne and destroyed, more than half” (1020.20-21). John Ganim argues that “we can turn to cinematic representations of medieval works and medieval worlds as a hidden barometer of our own understandings, even scholarly understandings, of medieval landscapes,” and two modern representations of the “waste forest” memorably highlight this darkness. John M. Ganim, “Landscape and Late Medieval Literature: A Critical Geography,” in *Place, Space, and Landscape in Medieval Narrative*, ed. Laura L. Howes (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007), xxv. In the 1981 film *Excalibur*, directed by John Boorman and explicitly based on *Le Morte Darthur*, the landscape of the Grail Quest is very much a separate space. Earlier in the film, the forest is depicted as a place of rich greens and browns. During the Grail Quest, the screen is dominated by scenes of Percival (Paul Geoffrey), filthy and weak, slogging through misty bogs and forests. This image is occasionally punctuated by the dead bodies of knights, or, in one case, the demonic laughter of the child Mordred. Robert Bresson’s depiction of the grail landscape in his 1974 French film *Lancelot du Lac* is even darker. His quest sequence is also in a dim and misty forest, but there is no music or dialogue. Bresson emphasizes the futility and grotesque violence through repeated, wordless killings of faceless knights by other faceless knights. Repeatedly, the only noise heard is the steady spray of blood from a fallen knight’s helm, splashing on the forest floor. John Boorman, *Excalibur* (Warner Home Video, 1981). Robert Bresson, *Lancelot du Lac* (New Yorker Video, 1974). In these depictions of the waste forest, there are no paths and no sense of direction: only futile, continual wandering.

If we seek a single entity or event that embodies the movement of Malory's forest most of all, however, we must look for the Questing Beast. This creature is the manifestation of this space's "fyne force" of motion: a quest that draws knights to seek it with incredible compulsion, forever, passed from knight to knight as each dies along the way. It leads a wandering path through the forest, always passing through the primary narrative of *Le Morte Darthur*, but never its focus. It first appears in one of the earliest quests of powerful, directionless rushing—Arthur has been chasing the white hart with such abandon that he has no idea where he is and has killed his horse:

So the kynge saw the herte imboced and hys horse dede, he sette hym downe by a fowntayne, and there he felle downe in grete thought. And as he sate so hym thought he herde a noyse of howundis to the som of thirty, and with that the kynge saw com towarde hym the strongeste beste that ever he saw or herde of. So thys beste wente to the welle and dranke, and the noyse was in the bestes bealy lyke unto the questing of thirty coupyl houndes, but alle the whyle the beest dranke there was no noyse in the bestes bealy. And therewith the beeste departed with grete noyse, whereof the kynge had grete mervayle. (42.7-17)

Although in a later appearance of the Beast we learn that it "had in shap lyke a serpentis hede and a body lyke a lybud, buttocked lyke a lyon and footed lyke an harte" (484.4-6),⁶⁹ at first it is given no physical description other than its remarkable "strangeness." Its motion defines it, rushing into a clearing and back out again—so that when King Pellinore appears "ryght so" it is already two miles gone (42.22-23)—in addition to its noise, which is the noise of a large pack of hounds "questing." Like the "thunderous"

⁶⁹ This physical description has, fascinatingly, led to an argument published in 2004 in *Arthuriana* that the Questing Beast was based on stories of a giraffe, perhaps "styled after a tale about the private *menagerie* of Emperor Frederick II (1194-1250), who liked to amaze his Italian and German subjects by taking his exotic pets, such as elephants, camels, lions, leopards and giraffes—presents from the sultan—along on his travels through his realm." "What Kind of Animal was the Questing Beast?" *Arthuriana* 14, no. 2 (2004): 69. The argument is surprisingly convincing, but giraffe or magical beast (or giraffe *and* magical beast, as it would likely have been seen), I argue that the role it plays in *Le Morte Darthur* is primarily one of motion.

motions of battle, its appearance and disappearance, coupled with its wondrous form, comprise a marvel. The power of this wonder to drive motion is superlative: King Pellinore arrives after killing his horse in the chase (““sir, I have followed that beste longe and kylde myne horse, so wolde God I had another to follow my queste””), and vainly running after it on foot, something that even the Grail is powerless to cause Percival to do after his own horse is killed (42.25-26):

Ryght so com one with the kyngis horse. And whan the knyght saw the horse he prayde the kyng to gyff hym the horse, ‘for I have folowed this queste thys twelve-monthe, and othir I shall encheve hym othir blede the beste bloode in my body.’ (Whos name was kyng Pellynor that tyme folowed the questynge beste, and afftir hys dethe sir Palomydes folowed hit.) ‘Sir knight,’ seyde the kyng, ‘leve that queste and suffir me to have hit, and I woll folowe hit another twelve-month.’ ‘A, foole!’ seyde the kyng unto Arthure, ‘hit ys in vayne thy desire, for hit shall never be encheved but by me other by me nexte kynne.’ (42.27-43.9)

Its draw is such that it leads Arthur to beg for the quest, and, interestingly, he seems not to expect to catch it, but to chase after it for a year. The nature and trajectory of the beast are tangential to the primary stories, and so it is fitting that it provokes a narrative aside: looking to the death of Pellinore when he has just been introduced, and forecasting the role of a knight (Palomides) who will not appear in the text for many pages.

Its second appearance, while it is Sir Palomides’ quest, is similarly sudden, tangentially, and random. In the middle of a quest of Tristram and Lamorak, the narrator suddenly decides to tell us that “meanewhyle” Sir Palomides had been (was, is, and will be) on this quest: “and thys beste evermore sir Palomydes folowed, for hit was called hys queste” (484.3-10). We learn of this not because of some change in this eternal motion, but because the beast happens to run through the frame of the main action; Palomydes, imbued with the power of momentum, summarily unhorses both other great knights and

continues questing, “wherefore thes two knyghtes were passynge wrothe that sir Palomydes wold nat fyght with hem on foote” (484.15-17). Even an encounter with some of the greatest knights of the world, one of which is a personal rival of Palomides, is powerless to stop the questing after the Beast.

It is the “meanwhyle” in which the Questing Beast moves that gives it much of its evocative power. It embodies the meanwhile: its appearance is always tangential, its description is sparse and mysterious—at first not provided at all—and it only explicitly inhabits a few lines of text. This “meanwhyle” echoes throughout *Le Morte*, however, and can be attached to any line of the text. X or Y event is happening: meanwhile, Sir Pellinore, or Sir Palomides, is chasing the Questing Beast. It embodies “off-camera” movement, briefly highlighted in the frame of the main action, and then out again almost before it can be seen. In earlier stories on which the Beast is probably based, it is grotesque; in Spenser’s later version, it is horrifying and endowed with moral significance.⁷⁰ Neither representation is anything like Malory’s creature. As its name

⁷⁰ “This strange feature [of a beast with the noise of hounds in its belly] seems to be taken from the *Gesta Regum* of William of Malmesbury, who reports a haunting dream King Edgar had while sleeping under an apple tree. He dreamed of a bitch whose whelps could be heard barking in her womb. This is explained by his pious mother as an omen of future attacks on the Church. In *Perlesvaus*, the ‘questing’ in the Beast’s belly is seen as Christ being hounded by the twelve tribes of Israel, and in Gerbert of Montreuil’s *Continuation de la Conte del Graal*, the Beast is the Church worried by people who disturb the sacred service by talking and complaining of hunger.’ In both these early sources the Beast is killed by its offspring. Interestingly, in a South Slavic tale, the Twelve Dreams of Schachi, there appears a bitch with yelping whelps in her body. This tale has also an Arabic variant which is probably its ultimate source.” “What Kind of Animal was the Questing Beast,” 66. The Blatant Beast, clearly Spenser’s version, has some similarities to Malory’s; for example, Sir Artegall declares, “The Blatant Beast (quoth he) I doe pursew, / And through the world incessantly doe chase” Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. Thomas P. Roche, Jr. (London: Penguin, 1978), 879. Elsewhere in the story, “All sodainely out of the forrest nere / The Blatant Beast forth rushing vnaware, / Caught her thus loosely wandring here and there” (909). Spenser imagines its many tongues, however, as the tongues of men speaking rumor and blasphemy and depicts it as an evil and threatening force that must be killed, like his more famous dragon. Malory’s representation is a notable departure from the allegorical in the tradition before and after him, supporting the significance of his Beast’s role as a neutral manifestation of movement and an embodiment of his forest.

implies, it is the manifestation of movement—appropriately, always in the forest shaped by this motion. Its effect, as a textual phenomenon, is to *expand* and convolute: it shows us that the wandering trajectory of the quest is always happening somewhere in *Le Morte Darthur* even in the few moments in which it is not the main action, and further complicates this network with another wandering, tangible, irresistible thread. The Questing Beast demonstrates, more than any other person, creature, or event, that something profoundly non-linear is going on in the narrative trajectories of *Le Morte*. In the previous chapter, I have questioned the linearity of the quest in fourteenth-century romance; in the fifteenth-century, Malory has abandoned it altogether in favor of something else: a tangled network of motion constitutive of an Arthurian world. Chrétien de Troyes may be rightly credited with first taking disparate stories of Arthur and transforming them into an Arthurian world,⁷¹ but Malory created Arthurian space in its most memorable form.

In Malory's words about the "foreste of Arroy," one space within the vast space of his forest: "the contrey is of stronge adventures" (162.23). Its representation could not be less like the "set piece" landscape description of the *Vulgate Cycle* that Lambert describes, and yet it is far from absent. It is a vast presence in *Le Morte Darthur*, an all-encompassing space that is constituted by the motion of people and creatures. As a shaping force, it draws knights and ladies into itself, setting narratives in motion, even as it entangles them and perpetuates their wandering, becoming a network of trajectories that is the source of joy and adventure as well as sorrow and pain. At the same time, its

⁷¹ David Staines, "Introduction," xxvii.

convoluted form and motion mirror the structure of *Le Morte Darthur* itself. Even aside from the extranarrative *mouvance* described earlier, Malory's book is one of narrative leaps, unexpected divisions and continuities, loops and circularities. His narrative asides enact the same kind of sudden, multidirectional movements as the incessant travels of his characters. Even in order, transitions from event to event are so rapid that they often feel disjointed, and Malory does not maintain chronology, referring to an event in the first book "as it rehersith afterward and towarde the ende of the MORTE ARTHURE" (55.32-33). King Mark appears long before his primary story without explanation (71.21-22), Balin's tale is suddenly interrupted as Merlin wedges in a prophecy about a much later battle without warning (72.5-8), and we are told: "so there was a knight that was called the Knyght with the Strange Beste, and at that tyme hys right name was called Pellynore, which was a goode man off prouesse as few in tho dayes lyvyng," as if he had not just been telling a story about King Pellinore at length a few pages earlier (77.8-11). Interruptions like this occur frequently in *Le Morte*, giving the impression of a forgetful narrator, or of a narrative not progressing in order. Section breaks are varied, inconsistent and often truly strange, as in one that appears, seemingly at random, in the middle of a conversation:

So anone kyng Arthure and sir Uwayn dressed them before sir Trystram and requyred hym to telle where he hadde that shyld. 'Sir,' he seyde, 'I had hit of quene Morgan le Fay, suster to kyng Arthure.' So here levith of this booke, for hit ys the firste booke of sir Trystram de Lyones. And the secunde boke begynnyth where sir Trystram smote downe kyng Arthure and sir Uwayne, bycause why he wolde nat telle hem wherefore that shyld was made. But to sey the soth, sir Trystram coude nat telle the cause, for he knew hit nat. 'And yf hit be

so ye can dyscryve what ye beare, ye ar worthy to beare armys.’ ‘As for that,’ seyde sir Trystram, ‘I woll answeare you. (558.28-559.9)⁷²

The received impression is of a book seeking a highly ordered structure but failing to find it; the chaotic force of its multidirectional and fragmentary narrative trajectories is greater than the attempts to order them, and so Malory seems to let it go. The verbs Malory uses in his asides to indicate that the narrative is changing direction are words of spatial movement: often “turne” or “lete we hym passe” but occasionally “leapeth” or “overleapeth,” as in, “here this tale overlepyth a whyle unto sir Launcelott” (466.32-33). Malory personifies his narrative flow as one of his characters, always moving. Lines like “so lette we hym passe and turne we to another tale,” along with the activity presented in the “meanwhile”—exemplified by the Questing Beast—further contribute to *Le Morte Darthur*’s convoluted form. This disordered state is enigmatic and enchanting, and perhaps it has been readers’ desire to make it all fit together, or alternately to get lost within it, that accounts for its enduring resonance.

Le Morte Darthur, situated at or near the end of the English Middle Ages by any reckoning, constitutes a final expression of Middle English romance movement. With the increasing standardization and codification of the language and printing, as well as the advent of Tudor literary tastes, this particular kind of mobile work does not appear again. Malory’s thematic employment and expression of movement—communicated through perpetual, multidirectional travel, the universal refusal to abide, and the spatial structure

⁷² In Vinaver’s edition, the lines describing the section break are in small capitals and separated from the surrounding conversation by a line on each side—still included in the middle of the conversation—but here I follow the Winchester Manuscript, in which there is no distinction between these lines. An illuminated capital “A” at “And yf hit be so” confirms that there is a significant section break in mid-dialogue in the manuscript. Ker, *The Winchester Malory: A Facsimile*, f. 229 (IX.44)-f.29(X.1).

of his forest—as we have seen, is an amplification of its form in the romances of the fourteenth century, although colored by certain fifteenth-century events and technologies. The fact that *Le Morte Darthur* is, in a sense, a fifteenth-century expression of fourteenth-century mobilization accounts in part for its inclusion in this study. The tension of such a work written at this time is palpable, and this very tension contributes to its importance. As is often true of things that are slightly out of place, *Le Morte Darthur* expresses its themes more explicitly, more emphatically than the romances of the fourteenth century, to counter its anachronism. The type of literary motion characteristic of the fourteenth century, therefore, stands out particularly visibly in *Le Morte*. It channels the power of this complex tradition of the preoccupation with movement in writing, and considering it in the context of fourteenth-century metrical romance, of Langland, and even of Chaucer, highlights its power and helps to explain its obsession with mobility. Even taken individually, the *Morte Darthur*'s paradoxical resistance to stasis, stability, codification, and linearity contribute to its unique magnetism. Like his forest, Malory's work draws us into itself and keeps us there, often—like Lancelot—not quite sure where we are or where we are going, sometimes—like Gareth—plunging over our heads in the mire, but driven to continue wandering through its moving world.

AFTERWORD QUANTUM JITTERS

In 2004, Brian Greene—one of the world’s leading physicists and proponent of “string theory”—released *The Fabric of the Cosmos: Space, Time, and the Texture of Reality*, a bestselling attempt to explain the intricacies of twenty-first-century physics to an audience that includes non-specialists. In his section on quantum mechanics and its relationship to string theory, he describes the “quantum jitter,” related to the principle of indeterminacy, a phenomenon that we now know causes gravity—and even space itself—to be in a state of perpetual, unpredictable motion on the tiniest scale. In Greene’s words, “the smaller the scale of observation, the larger the uncertainty, and the more tumultuous the quantum fluctuations become.”¹ This is true even of apparently empty space: “there is now little doubt,” he writes, “that the intuitive notion of empty space as a static, calm, eventless arena is thoroughly off base. Because of quantum uncertainty, empty space is teeming with quantum activity.”² Greene imagines the result of magnifying a region of space by degrees that are currently impossible to capture visually, beginning with “familiar scales”; on this level:

space appears calm and flat. But as we home in by sequentially magnifying the region, we see that the undulations of space get increasingly frenetic. By the highest level of the figure, which shows the fabric of space on scales smaller than the *Planck length*—a millionth of a billionth of a billionth of a billionth (10^{-33}) of a centimeter—space becomes a seething, boiling cauldron of frenzied fluctuations. [...] the usual notions of left/right, back/forth/ and up/down become so jumbled by the ultramicroscopic tumult that they lose all meaning. [...] The upshot is that on scales shorter than Planck distances and durations, quantum

¹ Brian Greene, *The Fabric of the Cosmos: Space, Time, and the Texture of Reality*, 333.

² *Ibid.*, 332.

uncertainty renders the fabric of the cosmos so twisted and distorted that the usual conceptions of space and time are no longer applicable.³

Quantum jitters, according to Greene, “mean that the shape of space fluctuates randomly”; as a result, all of space-time and matter, including the gravitational fields that govern motion and were once considered consistent, in fact have a “frantic, jittery character.”⁴

The more closely we are able to observe space and time, the more apparent it becomes that perpetual, random, “jittery” motion characterizes the most basic physical elements of the universe. It is now clearer than ever that, at the most basic level, “*diversa sunt ibi moventia* [“diverse moving things are there”].⁵ Recent developments in modern physics are surprisingly consistent with some of William of Ockham’s arguments and intuitions. As he sought to complicate Aristotelian physics, string theorists like Greene continue to complicate Einsteinian physics. Ockham’s assertion that, to explain motion, we need to look at more complex moving elements continues to be borne out; his belief that motion is more natural and fundamental than stasis is also consistent with our current understanding of physics.

The medieval works of literature studied in this dissertation depict motion as fundamental to existence, perpetual, randomized, and compulsive. Together, they represent a dynamic moment in the exploration of motion through poetry and prose. The fact that they depict movement in a way that continues to be evocative and—on some

³ Ibid., 334.

⁴ Ibid., 333, 335.

⁵ William of Ockham, *Expositio in libros physicorum aristotelis*, 626.

important levels, current—and that we can even begin to draw analogies between their poetization of motion and the principles of twenty-first-century physics, demonstrates the depth and insight of their literary representations of movement. We are still, like these late medieval authors, fascinated by questions about the nature of motion and its connection to human experience, as is demonstrated by *The Fabric of the Cosmos*' status as a National Bestseller. As we consider these late medieval English texts and their relationship to medieval experience as well as our own, their experimentation with movement should be an important part of the ongoing conversation—movement that is compulsive, random, marked by acceleration, and productive of aesthetically powerful and sometimes fragmentary effects for the reader or audience. Chaucer's wildly interwoven trajectories of sound as motion, Langland's depiction of compulsive wandering in jarringly mobile form, the directionless rushing of Yvain through the forest and the spatial loop of *Orfeo*'s "ympe-tree," and the tangled flux of Malory's forest, considered together, form an interrelated cluster of dynamic late medieval depictions of movement. To enrich our understanding of these works, we should give attention to the ways they communicate a vision of existence and form a body of literature that is—on multiple levels of literary expression—in perpetual and unpredictable motion.

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