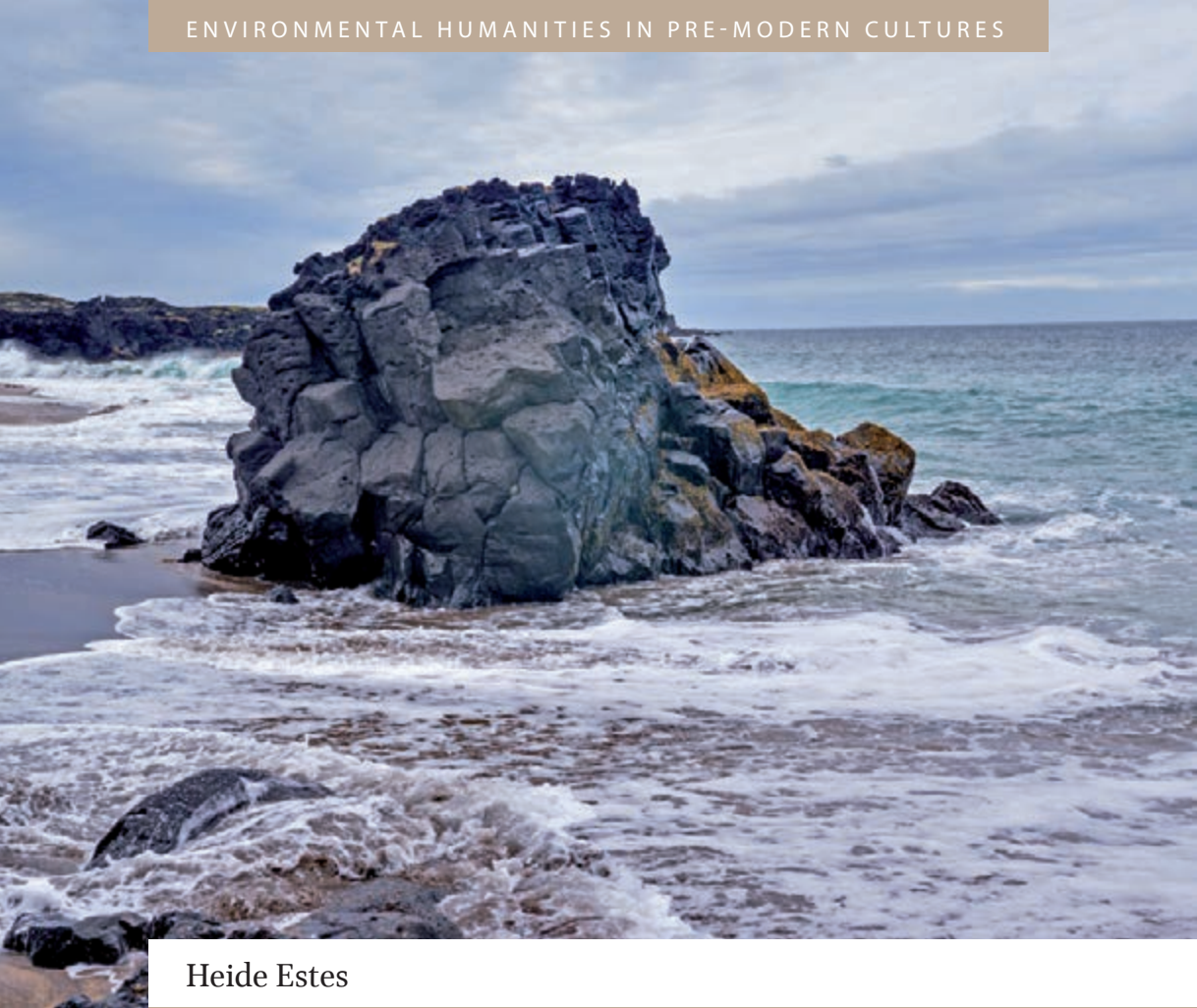


ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES IN PRE-MODERN CULTURES



Heide Estes

# Anglo-Saxon Literary Landscapes

Ecotheory and the  
Environmental Imagination

Amsterdam  
University  
Press

## Anglo-Saxon Literary Landscapes

# Environmental Humanities in Pre-modern Cultures

This series in environmental humanities offers approaches to medieval, early modern, and global pre-industrial cultures from interdisciplinary environmental perspectives. We invite submissions (both monographs and edited collections) in the fields of ecocriticism, specifically ecofeminism and new ecocritical analyses of under-represented literatures; queer ecologies; posthumanism; waste studies; environmental history; environmental archaeology; animal studies and zooarchaeology; landscape studies; 'blue humanities', and studies of environmental/natural disasters and change and their effects on pre-modern cultures.

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# Anglo-Saxon Literary Landscapes

*Ecotheory and the Environmental Imagination*

*Heide Estes*

Amsterdam University Press

Cover illustration: © Douglas Morse

Cover design: Coördesign, Leiden

Layout: Crius Group, Hulshout

Amsterdam University Press English-language titles are distributed in the US and Canada by the University of Chicago Press.

ISBN 978 90 8964 944 7

e-ISBN 978 90 4852 838 7

DOI 10.5117/9789089649447

NUR 617 | 684 | 940



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# Acknowledgments

My mother and father gave me a love for granite and birch trees and the view from above treeline, and have led by example in their efforts to limit development and maintain the habitat of the frogs and the mosquitoes and the white-tail deer. My debts to them are beyond measure.

I thank Sherry Xie, inter-library loan wizard at Monmouth University, who conjured numberless items from the ether with good humor and speed. My colleagues in the English Department at Monmouth University have given me the time and the space to write, and the faith that I could do so; I thank in particular Kristin Bluemel, Susan Goulding, and Sue Starke. My students in courses on literature and the environment gave me an opportunity to begin thinking through some of the ideas that have come to fruition in this book.

At Clare Hall, University of Cambridge, Alison Gill, Laurie Zoloth, Rosanna Cantavella, Trudi Tate, and Lisa Mitchell listened patiently as I worked through the ideas in this book. Richard Dance, Judy Quinn, Elizabeth Ashman Rowe and the rest of the faculty of the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic at Cambridge welcomed me for a second sabbatical, and the enthusiasm of ASNC's graduate students for my work was appreciated. Ruth Sternglantz, Laurel Chehayl, Harriet Soper, and Robert Stanton read portions of the work in progress and gave valuable feedback. Amara Hand and Ariana Tepedino helped with bibliographic details. Friends of more than forty years cheered me on through the ether: Melanie Blake, Doug Clay, and Heather Hodgkins believed in me and in this project, even when I did not. Ilse Schweizer Van Donkelaar of Amsterdam University Press encouraged, cajoled, and waited patiently for the completion of the manuscript. Gillian Rudd, AUP's peer reviewer, gave generous and encouraging feedback that improved the book immensely. A book on environmental criticism has to include a nod to the family dog, Jojo, who slept on my lap or at my feet for hours and hours upon end.

## Dedication

This book could not have come to be without Douglas Morse, who has helped clear space and time for me to write this book, and has provided encouragement and moral support as well as cooking and cleaning along the way. He and Zeke have given up many nights and weekends and have cheerfully tolerated my absent-minded professorhood so that this project could come to be. To them, I dedicate this book.



# 1 Introduction

Environmentalists today worry about a newly felt sense of impermanence around places in which we live, arguing that we live in archipelagic, disconnected dwelling places in a time of increasing travel, migration across and among continents, and the construction of mass-market 'non-spaces' (Buell 2005: 63) such as fast-food joints and airports, indistinguishable one from another. Ecologists insist on the importance of seeing the environment not as a static background for human actions but as a system in flux. Post-colonial theorists point to the problems with treating not only places but also humans themselves as 'resources' for the fulfillment of other people's desires.

These may seem modern responses to modern problems. But Old English poems already convey a sense of place as impermanent, threatened by natural forces, by human acts of war, and by acts of God. The colonizing seizure of land that is interpreted simultaneously as both unoccupied and as occupied only by demons coexists in the surviving corpus of Old English texts with animals and trees defying domination by human enemies. The description of landscapes as existing in processes of change anticipates modern environmental observations. Old English poetry can be described as archipelagic in its survivals: we usually know little if anything about authorship, about place of composition, or about date, so each surviving poem (occasionally a group of poems) forms a small island on which scholars construct paleographical, critical, theoretical edifices, with some distant connections to one another as well as to prose works in Old English or Latin.

Richard Kerridge poses a valuable question about what genres and forms of literature can lead to environmental engagement. Thinking from ecocritical points of view (the plural is intentional) while reading Anglo-Saxon poetry and prose, in Old English and Latin, can itself constitute environmental engagement, and can also encourage further action and activism. As Greg Garrard argues 'ecology and environmentalism are themselves the outcomes of specific institutional and political histories, which continue to inform, constrain, and deform both fields of endeavor today. It is necessary to historicize ecology, as well as learning from it' (Garrard 2014: 3). As Robert Watson notes, the ideas that enabled the Industrial Revolution, and that enable the continuing disregard of the environment, 'took shape hundreds of years ago and cannot be effectively addressed until they are understood' (Watson 40). Watson points to assumptions that the Romantic era was the starting point of problematic ideas about the environment, notes the same tendencies in scholarship of Renaissance literature, and acknowledges that

what might be called 'environmental literature' is older even than that: 'from the earliest instances of epic, pastoral and georgic, literature has offered a critique as well as an expression of nostalgia for the inviolate natural world that has always been not quite with us' (40). Like Watson, Kerridge makes the point that ecocritical engagement is, for many scholars, itself a form of activism: ecocritics 'are searching for ways of getting people to care' (362).

Many ecocritics and environmental activists dismiss or ignore the medieval, or misrepresent it in discussions of the modern; I will not catalogue those instances. One important aspect of this project is to bring the medieval into dialogue with ecocriticisms, to see how this project can lead to new readings of old texts but also how old texts and old ideas can challenge ecocriticism to think more sharply about historical contexts and how they have led to the current crisis. In the introduction to *Why the Middle Ages Matter*, Chazelle et al. argue that people – scholars and others – can and in fact must learn specifically from the Middle Ages. The period is often dismissed or ignored, but it is a source of and an important point of transmission for many of our current social formulations and constructions. Although the volume does not include an essay on environmental issues, the editors point out in the introduction that waste, an indicator of production, fell off dramatically in the transition from the long-distance economy of the Roman empire to the more local economies of the early Middle Ages (12). The point has often been made that the United States and other countries with heavily mechanized and huge agricultural conglomerates need to return to localized agricultural and economic production. The example of the early Middle Ages is that a return to local economies is possible, perhaps even without catastrophic origins or consequences.

Old English poetry predates environmental criticism and nature writing by centuries and cannot be said to participate in the debates and dialogues about what constitutes nature writing and how environmentalists should read literary texts. Yet reading Old English texts with attention to environmental depictions and concerns allows for new readings and interpretations of those texts and also opens up the possibility of introducing more nuance into modern views on the environment.

## **Anglo-Saxon Landscapes: Archaeological and Historical Evidence**

In this book, I undertake to investigate how the Anglo-Saxons conceived of their relationship to the land and its nonhuman creatures, as described

in literary and documentary texts. In fact, no single such relationship is discernable across Old English and Anglo-Latin poetry and prose: a range of attitudes exists. Landscape is presented as a neutral background to human activities, as an ordered environment in which humans and other creatures live out their natural lives, as a brief and fairly grim way-station on the path to eternal bliss in heaven or eternal suffering in hell, as a contested space in which physical and spiritual battles take place, and as a hostile environment for human activities. In order to consider meaningfully the depictions of landscape in Old English and Anglo-Latin texts, it is essential to have an idea about what sort of landscape Anglo-Saxon authors and scribes actually lived in. The landscapes of England varied considerably across different regions and there is good evidence that the uses of landscape shifted and evolved during the Anglo-Saxon period, understood as ranging from the arrival of Germanic groups in the post-Roman period through the Norman Conquest and perhaps beyond.

That said, it is possible to make the very general observation that the Old English landscape was primarily agricultural, with fields used at different times to grow vegetables, graze animals, or cultivate grains. Margaret Gelling's place-name studies and the archaeological research of Della Hooke, Tom Williamson, Debbie Banham, and others shed light on the landscapes of Anglo-Saxon England, including agriculture, forest, and town. Much of England had been cleared for agricultural use before the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons, and little wilderness remained, though there were fenlands largely impenetrable to outsiders as well as relatively small areas of forest and, primarily in the north and west, territories too mountainous to cultivate efficiently.

According to archaeological and historical studies, under Roman occupation the landscape of Britain was farmed quite intensively because the influx of troops, administrators, and other Roman colonizers increased the population, resulting in the need for greater amounts of food. The Romans brought with them the resources for grain production, which requires capital investment in plows and beasts of burden as well as mills and the means to transport grain and flour. The initial clearing of the land requires a particularly high investment of labor, but plowing, planting, harvesting, and processing the grain necessitate on-going investment of human, animal, and economic resources.

In the post-Roman period, with the drop in population and decrease in capital, grain production decreased significantly, and it was once believed that wild forest grew back over large areas of the landscape (Rackham 7-11). More recent research, however, demonstrates instead that fields cleared

by Neolithic and, later, Roman inhabitants were turned to use for grazing animals and remained clear of forest (Hooke 2010: 113). The population increased gradually during the Anglo-Saxon period and eventually rose enough to require increased production of cereal crops, and to provide the labor force and capital to enable it.

Old English laws and boundary charters make frequent reference to agricultural land. An often cited passage from the late seventh-century Laws of Ine, copied under King Alfred in the late ninth century, enumerates the penalties prescribed for burning or cutting trees, in particular when woodland was used to pasture pigs:

Gif mon afelle on wuda wel monega treowa, & wyrð eft undierne, forgielde III treowu ælc mid XXX scillingum.... Gif mon þonne aceorfe an treow, þæt mæge XXX swina undergestandan, & wyrð undierne, geselle LX scillinga.

If someone were to fell very many trees in a forest, and it afterward becomes clearly known, [he must] pay thirty shillings for every three trees.... Then, if someone cuts down one tree, under which thirty swine could subsist, and it becomes known, [he must] pay sixty shillings. (*Laws* 51)

Charters describing manorial, parish or other boundaries take, like legal texts, a utilitarian perspective on the characteristics of the terrain, providing enough information about topographical features, waterways and notable plant life such as hedges and large trees to identify the territory belonging to an individual, a monastery, or another social body. For example, a charter in which King Æthelred grants to Eynsham Abbey a large parcel of land lists landmarks including lakes, paths, stones, trees, and thorn-bushes (*Electronic Sawyer* S.9 911).

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* takes a more complex view of landscape, including utilitarian and anthropocentric material much like that found in the laws and charters as well as passages that describe landscapes and natural phenomena out of what appears to be intrinsic interest. The annual composition of the entries creates an immediacy that precludes a long-term overview, and in many entries the snapshot effect found in the charters is echoed in the annual additions. The *Peterborough Chronicle* entry for 656, for instance, records the gift of lands to the minster in Peterborough, including 'þas landes 7 þas wateres 7 meres 7 fennes 7 weres 7 ealle þa landa þa þærabuton liggeð' ('the lands and the waters and meres and fens and seas and all the lands that lie thereabout,' *Two Saxon Chronicles* 30). Later, the administrators of the minster had apparently rented out some of these lands, as the entry for

852 lists wood, brush, faggots, ale, and bread to be provided to the monks in exchange for the land lease. Many *Chronicle* entries refer to cattle and crops, and record features of the landscape in terms of their value to humans. In addition, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* describes natural phenomena such as lightning or comets, which it interprets in terms of human concerns, as ill omens of famine or attack from abroad. The entry for 975 records:

On þam ilcan geare on herfeste æteowde cometa se steorra. & com þa on þam eafran geare swiðe mycel hungor. & swyðe mænigfealde styrunga geond Angelcyn.

In the same year in the fall the star comet appeared, and then in the next year came a very great hunger and very manifold disturbances throughout the English people. (*Two Saxon Chronicles* 121)

Other *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* entries, however, present a view of nature that anticipates the environmental writing of Thoreau or Muir, and which Lawrence Buell might have found ecologically oriented as defined in his 1995 book, *The Environmental Imagination*, in which he described the kinds of literature he thought was fully engaged with environmental issues. He adduces four criteria, two of which are that ‘the human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest’ and that ‘some sense of the environment as a process rather than a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text’ (1995: 7, 8). The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* contains numerous references to natural phenomena separate from the mention of human endeavors, suggesting that they are of intrinsic interest. Moreover, the *Chronicle* describes changing environmental conditions at several points.

In many cases, such passages reference astronomical phenomena such as comets (678, 892, 905, 995) lunar and solar eclipses (744, 773, 806, 809, 904), and, perhaps, the aurora borealis (926, 979). For example, in 734 a chronicler reports without further comment: ‘Her wæs se mona swilce he wære mid blode begoten’ (‘In this year the moon was as if it were covered with blood’). The chroniclers also note such earth-bound phenomena such as ‘se myccla winter’ (‘the great winter,’ A761), and a great wind (1053, *Two Saxon Chronicles* 44, 51, 182). Yet another entry notes laconically that ‘wundorlice nædran wæron geseogene on Suðseaxna lande’ (‘wondrous snakes were seen in the land of Sussex,’ *Two Saxon Chronicles* 51). There is no articulation of any relationship between the snakes and the human occupants of Sussex: no comment about their potential utility or danger, no sense that they betoken some other event. As with other reports of natural phenomena, the chronicler’s attention to the snakes seems a consequence only of interest

or curiosity in some aspect of the natural world for its own sake, not out of concern for its relevance or potential value or harm to humans. Descriptions of earthquakes and winds show, albeit implicitly, a natural environment in a state of flux, not static, and one that is of interest not simply as a setting for human activities but for its own sake. Environmentalists today recognize that the earth is a mutable organism, not a static setting for human movement; so, it appears, did the Anglo-Saxon chroniclers.

Other entries describe changes in the environment as a result of human activity or as resulting in problems for human inhabitants of the land, again demonstrating a sense of the natural world as changeable, and not simply an inert setting for human affairs. The *Peterborough Chronicle* entry for 936 records:

Syððon com se biscop Aðelwold to þære mynstre þe wæs gehaten Me-  
deshamstede, ðe hwilon wæs fordon fra heðene folce. ne fand þær nan  
þing buton ealde weallas & wilde wuda.

Then the bishop Athelwold came to the monastery which was called  
Peterborough, which was earlier destroyed by heathen folk. He found  
nothing there but old walls and wild woods. (*Two Saxon Chronicles* 115)

Several entries written during the tenth century describe the destruction of agriculture and livestock by raiding Danish armies and note the subsequently occurring famine, though without making an explicit connection between the two. The entry for 1006 summarizes the effects of the army's repeated attacks: 'hi hæfdon ælce scire on WestSexum stiðe gemarcod mid bryne. & mid hergunge' ('they had bitterly marked every shire in Wessex with burning and with harrowing,' *Two Saxon Chronicles* 137). An entry recorded just before the Norman Conquest is even clearer in its recognition that human actions have had environmental consequences:

& þa Ryðrenan men dydan mycelne hearme ... hi ofslogon men & bærn-  
don hus. and corn. & namon eall þet orf þe hi mihton tocuman, þæt wæs  
feola þusend. & fela hund manna hi naman. & læddon norð mid heom.  
swa þæt seo scir. & þa oðra scira þæ ðær neah sindon wurdon fela wintra  
ðe wyrsan.

And then northern men did great harm ... they killed men and burned  
houses and grain, and took all the cattle they could get, that was many  
thousands, and many hundreds of men they took and led north with them  
so that the shire and the other shires which were near there were made  
for many winters the worse. (*Two Saxon Chronicles* 193)

It is not entirely clear whether ‘þe wyrsan’ refers to the destruction of crops or the loss of cattle or men, but it is reasonable to interpret the passage as indicating the combined effects of all three as implicated in the change in the countryside. Whoever wrote this *Chronicle* entry observed and recorded the fact that war was bad for the environment, because human actions resulted directly in the destruction of dwellings, landscape, and animals.

The use of trees and thorn-bushes alongside stones and streets in boundary charters suggests that their Anglo-Saxon creators had a view of nature, and even of individual trees, as quite static. For a boundary charter to function, the landmarks it identifies need to stay in place. It must be said, however, that the people who wrote such charters had to work within the constraints of the terrain they were surveying, and had to use the details of the terrain to create the best possible record of the transaction. This is modified by the more nuanced view of the natural world that the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* presents, in which some features of the natural world are of intrinsic interest apart from human concerns, and in which landscape features are observed to change as a result of human intervention, generally warfare.

Environmentalists and, subsequently, ecocritics have taken considerable interest in pastoral landscapes as well as in the wilderness. But in Anglo-Saxon texts, there is little evidence of wilderness terrain. Arguing from absence is always dangerous, and this may reflect the simple fact that documentary texts concern themselves primarily with inhabited areas, but archaeological evidence also establishes the relative paucity of wild regions in England during the period. There is a single reference to ‘wilderness’ in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, in the entry for 60 BC: ‘When the Romans entered the British Isles, ‘Ða flugon þa Brytwalas to þam wudu fæstenum’ (‘Then the Britons fled to the wooded wasteland,’ *Two Saxon Chronicles* 5). This wood may have been the forest of Andred, which became a refuge for the natives again in 477, when the Angles and Saxons came, and ‘þær ofslogon manige Walas & sume on fleame bedrifon on þone wudu þe is nemned Andredes lege’ (‘there they slew many Welsh and drove some in flight into the wood that is called the forest of Andred,’ *Two Saxon Chronicles* 5). By the year 1000, the forest of Andred was being used as pastureland, and its boundaries no longer functioned as a barrier to outsiders (Hooke 1998: 143, 145). Additional references to the wilderness appear in Felix’s *Vita Guthlaci* as well as in the Old English versions of the *Life of Guthlac*, a saint who retired to a hermitage in the fenlands of East Anglia, probably in 699 (Colgrave 5). The wilderness landscape in *Beowulf* is located in a probably imagined rather than remembered Denmark, not actually in England. But

these descriptions of the fens as a 'wilderness' reflect a cultural construction of the area as seen by people who lived elsewhere. Fenlands, impenetrable to outsiders, may look like wildernesses, but they were exploited for fishing and fowling, salt production, fuel from peat, and for pasturing animals during the growing season, when arable lands needed to be kept free of grazing animals (Hooke 1998: 170, 178-79).

The rural landscapes described in contemporary documentary texts, with agricultural production and the breeding of cattle, pigs, and other food-producing animals, are the actual landscapes of Anglo-Saxon England. Anglo-Saxon chroniclers and scribes would have lived in towns, monasteries, or rural environments, and not in the wilderness. Archaeological research likewise investigates areas in which human activity has occurred in Britain's past. The paucity of references to the wilderness in Old English documentary texts and archaeological evidence does not reflect a lack of study or records of the wilderness, but is based on the reality that there was simply not very much wilderness in Anglo-Saxon England.

Wilderness, then, is found in Old English texts almost exclusively in literary sources rather than in historical documents. Given the absence of wilderness in Anglo-Saxon England, it might seem surprising that Old English texts contain as many references to wilderness as they do. There are a very few references to desert in Old English prose, all involving locations outside of Anglo-Saxon England: the *Old English Orosius*, *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*, and the *Wonders of the East* all refer to wasteland and wild areas in Africa and Asia, but not in Europe. The majority of the references to wilderness in Old English literature occur in poetic texts based upon biblical events or saints' lives that take place in locations temporally and geographically far from Anglo-Saxon England.

Neolithic residents of the British Isles began clearing the country's primeval forests for agricultural use, and from the time of the Romans perhaps fifteen percent of the English landscape remained forested (Hooke 1998: 151). Moreover, the enclosed and therefore relatively remote forests devoted to royal hunting so well-known from later medieval texts were a rarity in Anglo-Saxon England, where instead forests were used at least seasonally for animal pasturage and were also managed fairly intensively as a source of timber through coppicing and pollarding, practices in which trees are cut back to a low or high stump during periods of dormant growth and then allowed to grow back for several years to be harvested again. Depending on the species, branches were cut in fall or winter to allow for subsequent regrowth; in either case, this allowed for the harvesting of wood for building and burning without killing the tree. Coppiced trees



are cut near the ground, which means they then need to be protected from animals during the period of regrowth. Pollarding, on the other hand, cuts branches back to a high stump so that pigs, cattle and forage can graze underneath the trees, eating nuts in season and nibbling on low branches as well as undergrowth, allowing the higher parts of the trees to continue growing (Hooke 2010: 139-40). During the harsher winter, animals might be brought into a barn or enclosed field nearer to dwellings; arable fields might be protected for agricultural use during the summer growing season by driving animals to pasture in woodland.

By the end of the tenth century one can imagine a landscape with large areas of open fields, some farmed for vegetables and fruits and some for grains, with other areas used for animal grazing. Extensively managed forests provided timber for building homes and churches as well as fences and various utensils and items of furniture. Fires for cooking and heat would have been stoked with peat or soft coal as well as with various kinds of scrap and garbage, including broken wooden implements. Small towns and monasteries tended to have structures clustered closely together amidst fields and stands of wood. A few settlements were large enough to consider urban, but even London had a population estimated at a mere 10,000 at its highest during the Anglo-Saxon period.

## Defining Ecocritical Terms

The foregoing discussion of the Anglo-Saxon natural landscape assumes that anyone knows what 'nature' means, or 'wilderness,' or 'environment,' or 'animal,' or even 'human.' Defining the terms used in an ecocritical discussion of Old English texts is complicated by the fact that many of these words are attested only in later forms of the language. 'Wilderness' sounds like an Old English compound, but while there are instances of 'wild' and 'deor' ('wild' and 'animal'), the compound formed of the two with the suffix 'nesse' is not actually recorded. Old English writers use the term 'weste' ('wilderness' or 'wasteland'), most frequently to reference the desert territories described in biblical texts and early saints' lives, translated into Old English from drastically different literary and environmental contexts. Lives of the English saints Cuthbert and Guthlac also use 'weste' to delineate the watery but withdrawn terrains where they located their hermitages: in one case, an island, in the other, a raised area bounded by marshy fenland.

The word 'nature' is first attested in English in about 1400 to mean the material world in opposition to humans (*OED*, s.v.). The Old English word

'cynd' (or 'gecynd') passed into Middle English as 'kynde' with a consistent meaning referring not to what modern people think of as the natural (non-human?) world, but to different classes of things or animals, and the qualities that belong to them. Old English texts use 'gecyndelic' to refer to the group of characteristics that belongs to a particular 'kind' of being or thing. Interestingly, 'ungecyndelic' means 'supernatural' and 'monstrous' (Bosworth-Toller, *s.v.*) as well as 'unnatural,' or not belonging naturally to a particular kind or class of beings. The meaning of 'cyndelic' in Old English is itself varied and perhaps slippery, even without resorting to the later borrowing, 'nature,' as a translation.

'Nature' in popular usage today refers to flowers, trees, animals, storms, and mountains, but not to humans, human buildings, food, clothing, computers, or books. But humans are, of course, also part of the natural world, evolutionarily continuous with other animals and dependent upon chlorophyll, bacteria, seeds, and bees for our very survival. Defining the term 'nature' in modern theoretical work turns out to be as complicated as figuring out what qualifies as an Old English equivalent. Huggan and Tiffin comment that the difficulty in defining the term 'is compounded by the widespread perception that modernity, however defined, is 'post-natural' in the dialectical sense of losing human connection to the natural environment while simultaneously gaining a reinvigorated awareness that nature itself is continually reformed' (203).

Kylie Crane distinguishes 'nature' from both 'environment' and 'landscape,' defining the latter as 'a deeply cultural product' associated with 'the specifically visual or a tradition as manifested in visual arts' (10). She contrasts this with 'environment,' which she uses 'to designate all perceivable aspects of the physical world that surrounds a perceiving entity' (10). Environment, then, includes both natural and built terrain, but requires a human being (or, perhaps, animal or artificial intelligence) at its center. Landscape also assumes a (human) viewer, but is separate from rather than surrounding and encompassing the beholder (9). Crane uses 'nature,' in contrast, to mean something 'deliberately vague,' but distinct from and beyond what is understood under 'landscape' or 'environment' (12).

Clearly, 'nature' remains difficult to define today. Many ecocritics refer to 'non-human' nature, thus acknowledging that humans are part of nature while bracketing off all that is human as distinct in some way. As Gillian Rudd notes, even 'green' is problematic: while people today think of it as the color of nature and of environmentalism, in the late Middle Ages 'green' carried the connotation of inconstancy, in contrast to blue, representative of fidelity. 'For Chaucer and his contemporaries... green was the color of

falsehood, unreliability, and deception, as well as the color of the natural world and of vigorous new life' (Rudd 2014: 30). Such a meaning is not attested for the Anglo-Saxon period, when 'grene' is used to refer to the color of grass and foliage as well as of gemstones and oxidized copper, as well as to vigorous (new) life and to unripe fruits or plants (*Dictionary of Old English, s.v.*). But the mutability of connotations and associations of 'green' even across the past six hundred years cautions against assuming continuity in the meanings of words.

## Environmental Criticisms and Ecological Theories

'Ecocriticism' is a relatively new discipline within the humanities that investigates literary, historical, artistic, and other cultural depictions of the relationship(s) between humans and everything else. In its early evolution, 'ecocriticism' referred primarily to the literary depictions of natural environments and animals, but in more recent figurations it has migrated to disciplines dealing with material objects as well as documentary texts, and encompasses topics as diverse as cities and cyborgs, postcolonial theory and social justice. Ecocritics understand human activities as having caused harm to the earth and its non-human elements and creatures, and see the critical enterprise as engaged with efforts to reduce consumption and slow the processes of climate change. The extent to which ecocritics see their enterprise as explicitly political, or connect it with political activism, varies.

An important concept within environmental studies is the 'Anthropocene,' defined as the current geological age beginning when humans first impacted the environment. Scientists vary in where they locate the start of the Anthropocene, some arguing for the Industrial Revolution and the deposit of carbon in the earth's surface as a result of human activities, others for the nuclear age, when radioactive particles begin to appear in the earth as well as in human teeth; still others point to other watershed dates, as for instance the beginnings of the cultivation of plants or grains. Meanwhile, many ecocritics call the current era 'post-human,' referring to a time when humans can no longer ignore our effects on the planet and consider ourselves to be distinct from or exceptional in the context of the rest of the planet's creatures and things. As Eduardo Kohn argues in *How Forests Think*, 'Creating an analytical framework that can include humans as well as non-humans has been a central concern of science and technology studies' (6).

Trying to trace a history of environmental criticism at this point involves viewing with great excitement a field that is exploding in size even as it moves into critical and theoretical territories unexplored even five years ago, and seen by some readers (for example Dominic Head) as impossible. Because of the speed with which new environmental criticism is being produced in the humanities, any survey will be out of date by the time it is published. In the comments that follow, I identify some of the starting points of environmental engagements in the study of history, philosophy, and theology and some of the origins of environmental literary criticism, and then sketch some promising directions recent ecocriticism has taken. Importantly, 'environmental criticism' or 'ecocriticism' is not a singular approach to literature, art, and other cultural productions, but rather encompasses a wide variety of approaches and methods. Several scholars have anatomized points of overlap and tension among deep ecologists, ecofeminists, post-colonial ecocritics, and others. Serpil Oppermann comments:

The only discernible pattern among ecocritical definitions is their focus on the importance of the relationship between literature and the physical environment; they also share the common aim to synthesize literary criticism with the natural sciences, and literary studies with the environmental philosophies. In fact as most of the ecocritics have repeatedly stated, ecocriticism seems to resist a single definition (105).

The biologist Rachel Carson's book about the effects of pesticides, *Silent Spring* (1962), is frequently cited as a point of origin for environmental criticism; certainly Carson brought the awareness of human effects on the environment to a large audience in a way that had not been done before. But she was not the first to observe environmental change or human effects on the environment. The postcolonial ecocritic Elizabeth Deloughrey argues that 'the rise of the modern concept of ecology and conservation... can also be attributed to the complex botanical networks of the eighteenth-century European colonial island laboratories' (323-34). Ecofeminists such as Val Plumwood (*Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*) and Carol Adams (*The Sexual Politics of Meat*) traced links between women's rights, animal rights, and environmental degradation; Peter Singer and PETA insisted on the sensibilities and therefore rights of animals, and Jacques Derrida discovered the gaze of his cat, as described in a series of lectures published as *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. A watershed moment for literary environmental studies was Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's publication in 1995 of

*The Ecocriticism Reader*, which brought together a collection of essays that discussed ecological problems in European and American culture and looked to literary study as a source of engagement with environmental issues.

As a literary enterprise, ecocriticism began with two related but somewhat different approaches: re-reading canonical texts with a renewed focus on the presentation of the natural world and the place of the human in relation to it, and re-evaluating and bringing into the canon texts not previously read as literature. Ecocriticism explicitly identifies itself not merely as an aesthetics of reading but as a political movement concerned with environmental crisis and responses to it in literary works and by scholars of literature. These include a sense of a natural world in danger, overrun by industrialization and urban/suburban sprawl, and a concern with advocacy for the preservation of relatively undeveloped areas as 'wilderness.' In a 1999 *PMLA* Forum on environmental criticism, Patrick D. Murphy noted the move from earlier critical paradigms in which environments were understood simply as providing setting for the actions of characters: 'they are instead seen as a fundamental feature of the ideological horizons of literary works' (1099). Writing in the same issue of *PMLA*, Ursula Heise provided a working definition of ecocritical thinking: 'Ecocriticism analyzes the ways in which literature represents the human relation to nature at particular moments of history, what values are assigned to nature and why, and how perceptions of the natural shape literary tropes and genres. In turn, it examines how such literary figures contribute to shaping social and cultural attitudes toward the environment' (1097). Broadly speaking, ecocriticism investigates literary depictions of human engagements with the non-human world, as it both reflects and shapes cultures.

Early ecocriticism focused on literary texts that were fundamentally concerned with the 'natural' world: rural environments and wilderness areas. In his 1995 book *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (1995), Lawrence Buell laid out several criteria for a work of literature to be deemed worthy of attention for environmental criticism. These include the ideas that nature must be a 'presence' in a work, not simply background or setting; that the work present an ethical sense of 'human accountability to the environment'; and that the environment be presented as an organism in a state of continual change, not a static entity (7-8). Buell's focus at this point was on literary works that engaged explicitly with issues of importance to late twentieth-century environmental activists. When the *Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* appeared a year after *The Environmental Imagination*, it

included Buell's book in a list of recommended further reading and called it 'a monumental work' (394). The essays gathered in *The Ecocriticism Reader* focus, like Buell's book, on works in which nature is a profound presence, and include canonical texts by writers such as William Faulkner alongside those by 'nature writers' such as Edward Abbey, Annie Dillard and Henry David Thoreau, as well as the science-fiction novelist Ursula K. LeGuin.

Scholars of literature quickly broadened their scope, as attested by books with titles such as *Beyond Nature Writing* (ed. Armbruster and Wallace) and *The Nature of Cities* (ed. Bennett and Teague). Buell himself later recognized that for environmental criticism to move beyond a very small niche in the study of literature, it needed to expand its focus and consider how any literary work could be examined from an ecological point of view. In his 2005 book *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, Buell describes his own movement from analysis of nature writing to a concern with a broader field of literary genres and argues that 'a mature environmental aesthetics – or ethics, or politics – must take into account the interpenetration of metropolis and outback, of anthropocentric as well as biocentric concerns' (22-23). Important areas for analysis, in different times and places, are the relationships between humans and the environment, in whatever environments humans have built for themselves, and whether human interventions leave environments relatively unaltered or completely constructed. Rather than focusing upon pastoral and wilderness literature, or even upon representations of rural and wilderness landscapes in works not centrally concerned with nature, 'second-wave ecocriticism' (Buell 2005: 22) also examines human relationships with environments, animals, objects, and each other, in various built environments, including cities.

Ecocritical thinkers who write about the city open a window into the experiences of wilderness, rural and urban environments by varying groups of people. A problem with pastoral, twentieth-century American nature writing, and first-wave ecocriticism alike is that all are written from the point of view of privileged members of society: economically advantaged, generally male and Caucasian. 'Wilderness' in late twentieth-century environmental discourse is territory that is uninhabited by humans, or territory that from the point of view of environmental advocates *should* be uninhabited by humans, and should thus be preserved from development. The protection of wild regions or agricultural landscapes from strip-mining or the construction of suburban McMansions is hard to argue with. But in practice, rural inhabitants who may have worked the land in a particular region for generations or centuries have been dispossessed for the sake of preservation of land called 'wilderness' because its occupants are different

in class and/or race from those doing the preservation. In the United States, for example, the creation of state and national parks has been done by removing the people who occupied the land before colonists arrived, as well as more recent settler farmers.

Writing about the city and about human entanglements with the natural world becomes a way of addressing several interconnected issues: the experiences of peoples of various economic classes and ethnic groups in and with wilderness and rural landscapes; the conception of wilderness in past generations as something essentially feminine – just a couple of examples might be the mountains in the United States Rockies named the Grand Tetons, or the giant breast-like mountain of H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* – viewed, possessed and controlled by male users; and the issue of environmental justice, which insists on the right of all people to have access to healthy living environments free of toxins and various kinds of pollution, whether in cities or in less densely populated areas.

Critics such as Michael Bennett, Karla Armbruster, Kathleen R. Wallace and Andrew Furman have explored the ways in which rural and wilderness landscapes have been irrelevant or even threatening for African Americans and Jews. In the ante-bellum United States, slaves living in towns and cities generally had better living conditions than those working in agriculture, since their living quarters were in owners' homes rather than in hovels among the fields and animals. Moreover, because slaves could not testify in court, the worst abuses of slavery in the United States occurred in areas where there were no white witnesses, i.e. away from towns and cities. The cities of the North became places to which slaves could escape from the plantations of the South and where they could, in effect, disappear, becoming anonymous among the large numbers of other humans, unlike in small towns where their appearance would surely be noticed. Jewish immigrants to the United States also settled in cities: the latest in a two-thousand-year history of migration to and expulsion from one nation after another. Forbidden from owning land in many medieval communities, Jews gathered in towns and cities where they could engage in trade, banking, and other occupations open to them. Furman suggests that the Jewish focus on texts, and indifference if not outright antipathy toward nature, can be traced even farther back, to traditional rabbinic wariness of pagan nature worship as well as to the creation of a Jewish community centered around the books of Torah following the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in the first century AD (52).

John Claborn points to the necessity of accounting for race in a cogent essay on W. E. B. Du Bois' travels to US national parks and 'wilderness' areas,

described in 'Of Beauty and Death,' published in 1920. Claborn recounts Du Bois' description of the indignities of the Jim Crow car he was forced to ride in during his journey to the wilderness. 'By intertwining such seemingly disparate and opposed spaces Du Bois forces us to compare them according to the logic of double consciousness' (124). As Claborn notes 'Muir's writing also participates in a discourse that assumes a division between culture and nature – a division that Du Bois implicitly challenges as racially codified' (121). Claborn points out that this 'wilderness' was not naturally occurring, but established by removing the inhabitants from what had once been native territory, and was created as a commodity for white male explorers from the urban east and south. But Du Bois' description of the Grand Canyon sees a 'wounded, feminized earth.... Expressed as an act of phallic violence inflicted on the earth, the sublime functions as a strategy to recuperate and represent an authentic encounter with nature' (125-6). Claborn does not discuss the functions of gender in Du Bois' narrative, thus allowing an association between landscape and femininity to appear 'natural' rather than acknowledging that associations between the 'feminine' and earth or landscape are also cultural artifacts.

Ecofeminists investigate links between cultural constructions of the environment and of gender, and challenge such dualities in contemporary culture. The tendency to see humans as separate from the natural world, rather than as a part of it, is a culturally conditioned point of view. Val Plumwood argued that a set of dualisms originating at least as far back as ancient Greece links the feminine with nature in a hierarchy that privileges human over non-human, masculine over feminine, mind over body, and production over reproduction (72). This mentality conceives of women and the natural world as existing to satisfy human (male) needs and desires. Ecofeminists suggest, moreover, that for human beings to take a responsible position with regards to the natural world requires a shift from dialectic to dialogic thinking, a reconceptualization of ethical meanings from the perspective of relationship, continuity, and embrace of difference, rather than of paired oppositions (Murphy 1991 *passim*). As Stacy Alaimo argues, 'Feminist theory and gender studies have demonstrated... that many unmarked, ostensibly ungendered fields, modes, and sites of inquiry have been shaped by the social categories of gender, race, class, and colonialism' (Alaimo 2014: 188). Alaimo further argues that it is not possible to study science or environment without attending to 'the knots and entanglements that intertwine nature and culture, science and the humanities, the knower and the known' (Alaimo 2014: 188). But some ecofeminist studies have in turn been challenged by post-colonial ecocritics and other theorists of



race and ethnicity as failing to attend to cultural, racial and economic differences in women's experiences, and thus focusing by default on the position of white women. Ecofeminism does not go far enough: it fails to recognize that it is not only women who become resources for men, but a wide variety of human beings, male and female, treated as 'resources' for those with privilege, who sometimes also include women.

Post-colonialist ecocritics bring together a wide variety of perspectives in showing how colonial ideologies about the exploitation of 'resources' have been problematic not only for the environment but also for many humans. As Deloughrey argues, 'Some of the work of postcolonial ecocriticism includes examining the implications of foundational narratives, problematizing assumptions of a universal subject and of an essentialized nature, and examining how forms of dominance are naturalized' (231). She points out that some environmentalists have taken the white male subject and its dominance as natural, and argues that colonization is not a subject for history alone, calling on ecocritics to attend to contemporary problems with United States military strategies, including the toxic environmental effects of various kinds of weapons and the tactics used in their deployment. She critiques Buell's claims that ecocriticism originated in the United States, and calls for '*contemporary* American ecocritics [to] use their strategic viewpoints to engage the ongoing military imperialism' (323). She notes the ways in which 'urban' and 'wilderness' have been intertwined since the beginnings of colonization, arguing that colonialism was 'a process that also occurred within and that radically changed the metropolitan center' (324). As discussed in Chapter 4, such colonization occurs in an Anglo-Saxon context centuries before modern 'exploration' began. As noted above, certain Anglo-Saxon texts show a recognition of the problem of environmental damage caused by military action. Deloughrey takes a broadly activist stance, arguing that ecocritics must attempt to 'dismantle the homogenizing networks of power in which we are enmeshed' (334).

Some work to connect environmental theory with disability and ableism has been done, notably in a conference on 'Composing Disability' held at George Washington University in April of 2016. Disability is interrelated with and sometimes directly caused by the design of constructed environments, while some disabling illnesses are caused directly by environmental degradation. As the conference organizers write 'Marginalized subjects, including disabled people, often experience their lives in greater proximity to environmental threats such as toxicity, climate change, generational exposures to unsafe living conditions due to poverty, militarization, [and] body exhausting labors'. This is an area where more work needs to be done.

Numerous environmentalists and ecoterrorists have pointed to modern levels of material consumption as constitutive of environmental change, though few point to capitalism itself as the problem. John Bellamy Foster, however, argues that Karl Marx's writings pointed to a need to take environmental issues seriously. Moreover, Jonathan Maskit argues directly that environmental philosophers have not dealt with, or not attended sufficiently to, the problems of (over-)consumption. He observes, among environmentalists, two possible models for dealing with the problem that capitalism is designed to increase production and consumption without end: an individual model, following Arne Naess, which suggests 'that the knowledge that it is ecologically undesirable to consume more, or even as much as one does, will lead one simply to want to consume less,' and a political model, in which social policies should incentivize reduced consumption among individuals (Maskit 130). He argues, however, that neither model goes far enough:

To say that there are downsides to modern life is surely not novel. What is new here is the suggestion that our addressing these concerns will require not merely technical, political, or policy suggestions, but a rethinking of what it means to be human. How could one at least begin to shape subjectivity? Here are some ideas: Don't watch television. Question all assertions that a practice is impossible. Know the people who produce your food. Figure out how to get from point A to point B without driving or flying. What is interesting about this list is that some of these things look like ascetic practices. And maybe they are. But they are practices oriented not towards being the way we always could have been but towards being a way that we did not know we could be (Maskit 140-41).

With its constant drive for MORE – more products, more resources, more consumers, more development – capitalism is deeply enmeshed with, if not directly causative of, environmental degradation: more production leads inevitably to more use of 'natural resources' and more waste. Reading and thinking from environmental perspectives are not enough: we need to take action at individual as well as communal levels.

The philosopher Timothy Morton (2013a) argues that it is important to understand climate change as 'hyperobject' which he defines as something so large that it cannot be apprehended by any individual at any one time, but only through the aggregation of large amounts of data across both time and space – which is why its existence can plausibly be denied. Scott Slovic argues that this is precisely why environmental study needs the humanities: stories provide a way to make sense of numbers too large for

humans otherwise to comprehend. Cheryl Lousley calls for games that help players to understand human effects on the environment. Richard Kerridge contemplates what literary genres can best make environmental change real for readers. In *Prismatic Ecology* and *Stone*, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen moves beyond many of the usual concerns of ecocriticism. *Prismatic Ecology* argues that environmentalism focused on green misses far too much. The rainbow of essays that Cohen assembled engages with objects, queer theory, and ultraviolet light, among other subjects usually not pursued by ecocritics. In *Stone*, he intertwines scholarly engagement with personal writing in a way that is unusual in the field of literary study but might be crucial if scholars are to have any impact on human responses to climate change.

As noted above, any survey of contemporary ecocriticism and ecotheory is bound to be out of date before the book sees publication, because the field is expanding and developing so rapidly. I have attempted here to point to some key areas of engagement in a large and growing field rather than to provide a full survey: several books and volumes of essays have attempted to provide an overview of the field, but inevitably remain incomplete (see Garrard 2012 and 2014, Westling 2014, and Hiltner 2015, as well as earlier surveys edited by Branch and Slovic 2003 and Kerridge and Sammels 1998).

Two points, however, are crucial. First, scholarly ecocritical writers and writings should not maintain careful ivory-tower distance in an academic vacuum, but must engage with real-world environmental problems. Second, a responsible ecocriticism must be at the very least aware of, and ideally account explicitly for, the presence of a wide variety of humans on spectrums including ability, gender, class, religious affiliation, and race, and of how these human categories of difference intersect in ways important to our engagements with the non-human world.

## Ecocriticism and Anglo-Saxon Studies

Ecocritical analyses of texts have included consideration of several broad environmental types, including representations of wilderness, animals, dwelling places and pollution, as well as pastoral and apocalyptic literary tropes. (See, for instance, Garrard 2012.) These major tropes, not surprisingly, do not map all that well onto Old English texts. Old English documentary texts make frequent references to rural landscapes in the form of discussions of arable land as well as the management (or plundering) of cattle, sheep, and other animals. There are few descriptions of earthly dwellings or of wilderness in documentary texts, though sermons discuss paradise

and heaven, and poetry refers to Roman ruins as 'enta geweorc,' the work of giants, while wilderness appears regularly in Old English poetry. Old English texts make frequent and memorable reference to the sea, a major lived environment for Anglo-Saxons, who fished and sailed it, and were threatened by its deadly storms on land as well as at sea. But this is primarily a feature of poetry, including adaptations of Latin prose as well as Anglo-Saxon poems with no known antecedents, rather than of documentary texts.

Several scholars have made important studies of Anglo-Saxon literary environments that did not take an explicitly ecocritical perspective, in that they described landscapes and other aspects of the environment while treating depictions of 'nature' as separate from, and subordinate to, humans and human concerns. Jennifer Neville's 1999 monograph *Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry* presents a learned overview of representations of the environment in Anglo-Saxon poems in Latin and Irish contexts. Her focus, however, is on human existence within Old English textual environments, rather than on the environment as an independent entity with potential moral or ethical interests. Instead of being simply a stable backdrop for human activities, it is but is itself in flux. She sees nature as something which defines, confines, and constructs humans, both individually and in social contexts. Moreover, partly as a result of the assignment of the Grendel-kin of *Beowulf* to the natural world rather than something either human or monstrous, she finds the natural environment to be unremittingly hostile and threatening to humans.

In the 2006 volume *Literary Landscapes and the Idea of England, 700-1400*, Catherine Clarke devotes the first two chapters to an exploration of representations of nature in Old English literary texts. The works she considers most fully here are *Guthlac A*, with its lengthy representation of the wilderness into which Guthlac withdraws as a hermit, and Bede's description of the island of Britain in the prologue to his *Ecclesiastical History*, which she examines in the context of several other Old English texts as well as contemporary and earlier Latin texts. Clarke identifies the ways in which these literary works draw upon and disseminate classical notions of pastoralism, working within pastoral traditions to depict delightful landscapes. In contrast to *Guthlac A* and Bede's prologue, Clarke also examines several Old English poems in which pastoral conventions are employed in inverted form to create antagonistic literary landscapes; among these, she includes *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* as well as *Beowulf*. Her point here is to demonstrate fairly wide knowledge in Anglo-Saxon England of earlier pastoral conventions.

Clarke's presentation of the natural world is broader than Neville's, and her discussion of the potential delights of nature seems to align with

celebrations of rural and wilderness landscape in the nature writing that early ecocriticism took as its primary subject. Her focus on the natural world, however, retains the sense that it provides an unchanging field for human activity, rather than being an organism, or set of interrelated organisms, that undergoes change or that is of interest in itself. In fact, an environmentally aligned analysis of literary texts finds the trope of pastoralism to be rather problematic. The literary form of pastoralism appears during a period of increasing urban development in classical Greece and idealizes the rural landscape as a location of peaceful escape opposed to the city, with intense human occupation of densely built-up spaces. In its classical beginnings, as in its later Renaissance and Romantic reappearances, pastoral literature tends toward a use of nature as a stage for or reflection of human activities and difficulties rather than as something important or valued in itself. The rural environment celebrated by pastoral writers as an escape from urban decay is also a human environment, many ecocritics would note, with agricultural lands constructed by and for humans. In addition, such literature ignores the people who occupy these pastoral landscapes or objectifies them as part of the scenery. While some ecocritics have explicitly rejected post-modern theory, post-modernist ecocritics would further reject the dichotomies assumed, shaped, and disseminated by the literature of pastoralism between city and country, between human and nature, between artificial and natural.

The study of early literatures, and their constructions of the human, of animals, and the environments built and occupied by humans, are important for an understanding of contemporary ecocritical crisis. In an ecofeminist analysis of the constructions of landscape in early Icelandic sagas, Margaret Clunies Ross points to the use of kennings in skaldic poetry that ‘conceptualize the earth as an animate female being’ (1998: 182 n. 4) to argue that settling Iceland ‘succeeded by means that involved the symbolic or ritual expression of masculine power’ (Clunies Ross 1998: 161). In an essay on textual editing in ecocritical studies, Michael P. Branch argues for the importance of early texts to our understanding of literary representations of landscape:

If ecocritics are to construct a more complete and accurate understanding of how landscapes are understood and depicted in literature, it is essential that we broaden our thinking to imagine nature writing as a category that includes sermons, settlement, narratives, and government reports – as well as personal essays – and that we recover and examine the works of earlier writers who may be overlooked because their understanding of the natural world is predicated upon ideological or aesthetic assumptions different from our own (6).

Similarly, Hubert Zapf argues that literature, with its often deliberately non-transparent use of language, has the power to illuminate cultural blind spots about environmental problems:

The literary works of the past appear, to a number of ecocritics, as anticipating the ecological knowledge of modern times.... Literature, from its very beginnings, has contrasted alienating structures of civilization with alternative forms of life embedded in concrete forms of a culture/nature exchange (55).

In 'The Landscape of Anglo-Saxon England,' Nicholas Howe categorizes representations of the landscape in terms of their emotional, metaphorical, or allegorical force as 'inherited, invented, [or] imagined' (Howe 2002: 91). In his discussion of landscape as 'invented' in Anglo-Saxon charters, Howe articulates an approach that resonates with ecocritical concerns, 'To invent a landscape is to order the natural terrain, or to impose organizing divisions on it, so that it becomes a human creation' (Howe 2002: 91). However, the imagined landscape remains for Howe something like traditional setting, in that he reads landscape functionally in this mode as a psychological or spiritual expression of, or as a counterweight to, human emotion. In the article, Howe focuses on the relationship between humans with respect to the land they describe. In his book *Writing the Map of Anglo-Saxon England*, Howe reads the *Beowulf* manuscript as a 'book of elsewhere' (Howe 2008: 178) that, together with the other texts in the manuscript, demonstrates the Anglo-Saxons' sense of their own place in Christian Europe and beyond.

Alfred Siewers' discussion of the *Guthlac* poems in the context of Celtic literature takes the first sustained, explicitly ecocritical, orientation to early medieval literature. He argues that landscape functions allegorically in Anglo-Saxon literary texts:

Cultural topography of emerging Angle-land was to be found in texts of Christian Anglo-Saxon culture, in allegorized form. The new literary monumentalizing was ultimately totalizing in intent, seeking as it did to control the narrative of land, ancestry, and identity through written text in which engagement with the physical land became increasingly symbolic and relative to a more transcendent spiritual cosmos and polity. (Siewers 2003: 6)

Siewers also points out that the Anglo-Saxon myth of migration as proposed by Howe is relevant to an ecocritical analysis of the sea; in a section of

the essay titled 'Into the Otherworldly Waters,' Siewers notes a similarity between Guthlac's fens and Grendel's mere, and calls the fens in which Guthlac takes up his solitary refuge 'wetlands as primeval wilderness' (Siewers 2003: 8). Bruce Holsinger, Elaine Treharne, and Sarah Kay have written about the fact that medieval texts survive on skin, in texts written out by hand, and Matt Low's essay on landscapes is a valuable ecocritical reading of Anglo-Saxon elegies.

The work of scholars of later medieval literature who have taken interest in ecocriticism is valuable in opening avenues for ecocritical thinking about Old English texts in that they also deal with the pre-modern and the ways in which philosophers, historians, and scholars of modern literatures have constructed the medieval as 'other' or have treated it as irrelevant for ecocritical analysis. Studies by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, Karl Steel, Gillian Rudd and Susan Crane have challenged and enabled my thinking, as detailed in the chapters of this book, in some cases pointing to fruitful avenues for thinking ecologically about medieval texts, but more importantly demonstrating the value and importance of thinking through a literature that is remote in time and philosophically and artistically strange to the modern world using the insights of a contemporary critical and theoretical mode. Karl Steel's ground-breaking work very fruitfully investigates the functions of literary depictions of animals in constructing the human in later medieval literature. Gillian Rudd's *Greenery* is an excellent engagement with late Middle English texts and their literary landscapes. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral and Inhuman Nature* both bring together numerous valuable essays that take ecocritical approaches to medieval and Renaissance literatures.

### Anglo-Saxon Texts and Ecocriticisms

This book does not attempt a comprehensive survey of ecocriticism and Anglo-Saxon texts. Ecocriticism has become so extensive a field, and there are so many Old English and Anglo-Latin poems and prose texts of interest for an environmentally-focused study, that to attempt to review them all in a single volume would allow only a superficial overview. Instead, I have in this book re-read a relatively small number of Anglo-Saxon texts from an environmentally committed point of view, bringing to bear different ecocritical perspectives in each chapter, including ecofeminism, post-colonial ecocriticism, critical animal studies, and object-oriented ontology, while discussing objects and animals as well as wilderness, ruins, and seas. In

juxtaposing the utilitarian view of nature expressed in *Beowulf*, *The Ruin*, and the lives of Guthlac – Latin and Old English, prose and poetic – with the treatment of the human as the enemy and animals and objects as subjects in the Old English *Exeter Book* riddles, I wish to make an argument overall that the ideas that enabled the Industrial Revolution and the climate crisis of today were already in circulation in the Anglo-Saxon period. But Anglo-Saxon texts also articulate the ability to value nature intrinsically, to assert that humans co-exist with ‘the natural world’ and must live in harmony or in tension with it. We need to come to grips with the long reach of the idea that some humans have the ‘right’ to treat the natural world as well as other humans as ‘resources,’ in order effectively to challenge the hegemony of these ideas in contemporary culture.

Studying several Anglo-Saxon texts in environmental detail has revealed, broadly speaking, a contrast between *Beowulf* and the lives of Guthlac on the one hand, and the *Exeter Book* riddles and perhaps *The Ruin* on the other. *Beowulf* and the *Vita Guthlaci* along with the Old English versions of the *Life of Guthlac* tell different stories about the landscape and humans’ relationships to it, but both sets of narratives present humans as entitled to using the world – animals, plants, landscapes, and territory occupied by ‘other’ humans – for their own purposes. The *Exeter Book* riddles, on the other hand, give voice to animals, plants, and objects made from ore, opening a door to the idea that the non-human possesses agency. In the chapters that follow, I take a variety of ecocritical approaches to these texts.

Chapter 2 takes an ecofeminist approach to depictions of the sea in *Beowulf* as well as in biblical epic and saints’ lives. These poems about heroes, monsters, and monstrous humans suggest that humans have dominion over the earth and its creatures. In *Beowulf*, *Andreas*, *Elene*, and *Exodus*, human characters treat land and animals as ‘natural resources’ that are (with interesting exceptions) limitless. Grendel’s mother is deeply intertwined with marginal marshland and her monstrosity reflects one aspect of cultural connotations of femininity with ‘nature’ in contrast to a more reasoning and more ‘human’ masculinity.

Chapter 3, on ruins, complicates this easy assumption of human dominion over the earth. This chapter revisits *Beowulf* and *Exodus* in addition to considering *Genesis A* and *The Ruin*. Attending to ruins and ruined dwellings in these poems makes it possible to locate humans in environments that are unstable, and in which they sometimes lack control, whether because of acts of God or natural decay. Ruins and ruination embed humans in the natural world rather than depicting them as separate from it or opposed to it. The lack of human builders in the Tower of Babel episode



is echoed by the absence of humans who can make repairs in *The Ruin*. Conversely, the ruination of Heorot in *Beowulf* is a consequence of human presence, specifically of human violence. These Old English literary texts describe ruins in meditations on human transience and the fall and rise of different cultural formations.

Chapter 4 addresses notions of wilderness and colonization as they appear in the lives of Guthlac: Felix's Latin *Vita*, the Old English prose translation, and the verse adaptation, *Guthlac A*. Saint Guthlac is a former warrior who colonizes as his hermitage an island in the midst of the East Anglian fenland. The area is called uncultivated wasteland, despite evidence to the contrary, and the former British residents are conceived of as demons. Like the monsters of *Beowulf* and the monstrous cannibals of *Andreas*, demons can be slaughtered without compunction. The insights of post-colonial theory allow a re-reading of the versions of *Guthlac* and a coming to an understanding of colonizing ideas and ideologies, or precursors to them, as they emerged in early Anglo-Saxon England. Rather than emerging after the English began traveling to other continents, ideas about 'others' that were articulated as early as the eighth century in *Guthlac* shaped how the English viewed the people they encountered in other places – and continue, today, to enable ideologies that see some humans as less human than others.

Chapters 5 and 6 both explore the ecocritically very rich territory of the *Exeter Book* riddles. As with the volume as a whole, these chapters do not attempt a survey of all the riddles that could profitably be read with an ecocritical eye, but instead make careful and extended readings of a sampling of them. Chapter 5 examines the Riddling depiction of wild birds in the context of the formulaic depictions of beasts of battle from poems in the epic tradition, and it investigates the ways, in the *Exeter Book* riddles and related texts, that eating animals is presented as 'natural'. The chapter also examines the complex interactions of subject and object, speaker and audience, in Riddle 26, in which an animal is skinned and its hide made into a book of scripture. The process is described in the voice of the animal as the 'I' of the poem, which refers to humans as the enemy, challenging easy assumptions about human dominion or dominance over animals.

Chapter 6 turns to several riddles the solutions of which are objects made from naturally occurring sources, including trees, deer antlers, and ore from the earth. The transitions between animals and trees and the objects made from them blur the lines between sentient beings, living non-sentient organisms, and everyday things as well as ritual objects. In an on-going examination of how human and object are intertwined, and thinking through Timothy Morton's concept of 'hyperobjects' (2013a), the

chapter delves into how several of the riddles reveal operations of gender and power in Anglo-Saxon society, consigning some humans to the margins while centralizing some people and elevating some objects to the point of veneration.

In the conclusion, I draw connections among the various theoretical approaches used throughout the volume and draw out intersections among them that reveal potential weaknesses in individual approaches. I suggest areas for future research, including locating traces of Anglo-Saxon environmental thinking in a longer literary and historical view and a broader geographical one. And I emphasize again the need to connect studies of literary ecologies with environmental commitments.

Throughout the volume, I argue that attention to Anglo-Saxon texts – poems and poetry, Old English and Latin – is rewarded by thinking from an ecocritical perspective. Though ecocriticism is often focused on the modern, on the present, environmental theories can also be enriched by the consideration of how texts from 1000 years ago imagine the interactions between humans and their worlds, natural and built. As I argue throughout this book, it is not the Industrial Revolution that caused us to think of our environment in terms of ‘natural resources’ for human consumption, but the pre-existing idea that humans could use the natural world, including other humans, in pursuit of their own needs and desires, that enabled the Industrial Revolution and subsequent commercial, colonial, and political enterprises the effects of which include environmental degradation and climate change as well as social inequalities.