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Ywain the ‘Social Monster’: A Political Reading of Ywain and Gawain through an Embodiment Perspective

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Abstract

This paper reads *Ywain and Gawain* as a political allegory in which the figure of the wild man embodied in Ywain functions as a narrative of crisis and remediation. Unlike Chrétien’s version, which seeks to uplift the young, landless knightly class through a reflection on the discourse about courtly love and its apparent contradictions, the Middle English adaptation intensifies the political implications of these contradictions. By reducing the narrative’s emphasis on courtly love, the poem foregrounds Ywain’s wilderness episode as central to understanding the political undertone of the poet’s articulation of anxieties surrounding the decline of knighthood as a symptom of perceived sociohistorical crisis. Situated within the historical context of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, this articulation draws on established literary archetypes of the wild man to produce what I term *social monstrosity*. The wild Ywain becomes a social monster through the uncanniness generated by the collapse of the knight’s social identity and the uncertainties that follow.

Introduction

The Middle English romance *Ywain and Gawain* survives in a single manuscript witness: London, British Library, MS Cotton Galba E.ix (folios 4–25). Although the text was copied in the fifteenth century, the poem is thought to have been composed a century earlier (1330–50) by an anonymous poet writing in a Northern dialect with some Northeast Midland forms.¹ Its source is Chrétien de Troyes’ *Yvain, ou Le Chevalier au Lion*, written in the late 1170s for a French courtly audience.² However, the Middle English poem quite evidently reworks its source material to respond to social and political anxieties in England at the time of

¹ *Ywain and Gawain*, ed. by Albert B. Friedman and Norman T. Harrington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. ix, xi, lvi–lviii, lx–lxiii.

² All quotations of the Middle English *Ywain and Gawain* are taken from *Ywain and Gawain*, ed. by Mary Flowers Braswell (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995); while those for *Yvain* are from Chrétien de Troyes, *Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. by Daniel Poirion (Paris: Gallimard, 1994). When the French text is supplied, the modern English translation is from Chrétien de Troyes, *Yvain or The Knight with the Lion*, trans. by Ruth Harwood Cline (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1975). Here, the lines cited are l. 26 and ll. 19–21 of the two editions, respectively. All translations of the Middle English text are my own.

its composition. In this regard, David Matthews frames the work as a case of 'ideological translation,' noting how its form and meaning shift to accommodate the expectations of an audience in a new sociohistorical milieu.³ For Matthews, where Chrétien's *Yvain* reflects the aspirations of a twelfth-century knightly class seeking assimilation into a feudal hierarchy and tries to refine them through courtly-love-related elements, the English redaction is deemed to follow a different agenda. Here, an established aristocracy is confronting the erosion of its own authority and values under the pressure of shifting sociohistorical circumstances.

In a similar vein, I argue that *Ywain and Gawain* deliberately reduces the courtly elements inherited from Chrétien's version in order to sharpen the poem's resonance as a 'political allegory'.⁴ Read against its manuscript context — a compilation dominated by moral and overtly political texts — the romance appears less invested in courtly representation than in social diagnosis. The Middle English poet strips away features central to Chrétien's treatment of both love-madness and the marvellous as effects of Yvain's courtly and knightly obligations — namely, the maid's speech on love, the rhetoric of *trouthe*, and the framing of his forest encounters with the herdsman and the gamekeeper. Deprived of these courtly elements, love-sickness loses much of its explanatory force. By minimising courtly love as a motivating framework, the poem redirects attention to the political implications of both the protagonist's incapability of keeping his promise and the resulting episode in the wilderness.

Drawing on established archetypes of the wild man, the poet produces what this article terms *social monstrosity*: an uncanniness generated not by physical deformity, but by the visible derangement of the knight's social identity and the uncertainty this collapse creates. The episode in the wilderness thus emerges as the poem's political core, staging the perceived civilisational crisis. Because this identity is performed and embodied, this article turns to Ruth Evans' application of Giorgio Agamben to medieval romance. I employ the concept of *bare life* to read Ywain's wildness and its body-correlates as conditions that strip away the trappings of civilisation and expose the constitutive elements and at the same time vulnerability of knightly identity.⁵ As Randy P. Schiff observes, following Agamben, such exposure of the body is central to 'analyzing the ideological program of the medieval West's military aristocracy'.⁶ In this framework, the wild man ceases to function primarily as a figure of amorous suffering and instead becomes the vehicle through which the poem articulates anxieties about the decline of knighthood.

The various contexts of the poem

Scholarly debate has centred on the purposes of the Middle English redirection, proposing different interpretations that mostly present the poem as a response to the social and political anxieties of the fourteenth century. Exactly what the ideological translation represents is a matter of debate. As Dieter Mehl notes, the outset of the *Ywain and Gawain* expresses the anonymous poet's regret for a general 'lack of truth and loyalty among his contemporaries', and

³ David Matthews, 'Translation and Ideology: The Case of Ywain and Gawain', *Neophilologus*, 76.3 (1992), 452–63.

⁴ Randy P. Schiff, 'Reterritorialized Ritual: Classist Violence in Yvain and Ywain and Gawain', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 56.3 (2014), 227–58 (p. 237).

⁵ Ruth Evans, 'Sir Orfeo and Bare Life', in *Essays in Honour of Stephen Knight*, ed. by Ruth Evans, Helen Fulton, and David Matthews (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006), pp. 198–212.

⁶ Schiff, 'Reterritorialized Ritual', p. 229.

sees in Arthur's court 'the perfect realization of his ideals'.⁷ Gayle K. Hamilton interprets the poem's moral emphasis on 'the ambiguous possibilities of the spoken word,' which can either affirm values central to the preservation of feudal hierarchy and landed power or disrupt them.⁸ John K. Bollard argues that the central concern of the poem lies in the persistent 'theme of courtesy,' which is foregrounded and problematised through the poet's stylistic and narrative choices throughout the text.⁹ Beyond moral and literary concerns, critics have also proposed a line of interpretation that stresses the poem's political significance. For instance, Randy P. Schiff situates *Ywain and Gawain* within aristocratic class anxieties, but argues that the poem ritualises sovereign exception in order to reproduce and stabilise knightly authority through violence, exclusion, and the management of class and species difference.¹⁰ Christian Beck emphasises the protagonist's nomadic movements as a radical spatial resistance to institutional power structures, reading the poem as a model of insurgency against feudal hierarchy and landed aristocracy.¹¹ Benjamin H. Hoover treats the poem as a critique of youthful chivalric excess, demonstrating how errant knightly violence is figured as disruptive to social stability and cohesion.¹² Collectively, this scholarship has established consensus that the poem departs significantly from the courtly-related matter of its Old French source to respond to distinct historical circumstances by engaging discursively.

As Richard W. Kaeuper notes, in fact, romance literature was 'the locus' for 'a literature of debate, criticism, and reform' on how the nobility should live, rule, fight, and worship.¹³ Mehl's observation about the idealisation of Arthur's court does not contradict Kaeuper's formulation of romance as ideological debate. Instead, I argue that idealisation functions normatively: Arthur's court provides a standard against which social deviation can be staged. More recent scholarship has refined this view by showing how such debates are represented through encounters with marginal spaces, labouring bodies, and moments of embodied disorientation rather than through chivalric action alone. Miranda Griffin has shown that scenes set beyond the court repeatedly function as sites of contact and tension, where social identity is tested through proximity to non-aristocratic work, unfamiliar bodies, and unstable environments.¹⁴ Likewise, Drew Maxwell's study of grief-madness in Middle English romance situates episodes of emotional collapse within a cultural logic in which madness exposes the fragility of knightly selfhood and the limits of masculine self-regulation.¹⁵ In fact,

⁷ Dieter Mehl, *The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1969), p. 183.

⁸ Gayle K. Hamilton, 'The Breaking of the Troth in Ywain and Gawain', *Mediaevalia*, 2 (1976), 111–35 (p. 124).

⁹ John K. Bollard, 'Hende Wordes: The Theme of Courtesy in Ywain and Gawain', *Neophilologus*, 78.4 (1994), 655–70 (p. 669).

¹⁰ Schiff, 'Reterritorialized Ritual'.

¹¹ Christian Beck, 'Shaping Our (Medieval) Future through Nomadic Insurgency: A Radical Reading of Ywain and Gawain', *Mediaevalia*, 36.1 (2016), 325–51.

¹² Benjamin H. Hoover, 'That Knyght That Idil Lies': Processes of Age and Identity and Ywain and Gawain's Critical Perspective', *Essays in Medieval Studies*, 38.1 (2023), 47–65.

¹³ Richard W. Kaeuper, 'The Societal Role of Chivalry in Romance: Northwestern Europe', in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. by Roberta L. Krueger, Cambridge Companions to Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 97–114 (p. 99).

¹⁴ Miranda Griffin, 'Figures in the Landscape: Encounters and Entanglements in the Medieval Landscape', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 49.3 (2019), 501–20.

¹⁵ Drew Maxwell, '"Sorow Wil Meng a Mans Blode and Make Him for-to Wax Wode": Representations of Male and Female Grief-Madness in Middle English Arthurian Romance', in *Grief, Gender, and Identity in the Middle Ages: Knowing Sorrow*, ed. by Lee Templeton, Explorations in Medieval Culture, 18 (Leiden: Brill, 2022), pp. 190–209.

Albrecht Classen argues, medieval courtly romances, far from simply idealising aristocratic values, consistently expose the fragility and hypocrisy of the courtly world they depict.¹⁶ Figures such as outsiders, rebels, and wild men serve as instruments of moral and political critique, revealing the tensions and contradictions at the heart of chivalric society.¹⁷

David Matthews seems to corroborate these positions by comparing Chrétien de Troyes' twelfth-century *Yvain* with the mid-fourteenth-century Middle English redaction.¹⁸ Whereas Chrétien addressed an audience of a courtly aristocratic class, in the English *Ywain*-poet's world, growing social mobility had caused an expansion of romance readership among the gentry and urban classes. The English poet's audience was not less aristocratic in composition, but one that increasingly felt itself in decline — less self-aggrandising than Chrétien's twelfth-century court, and perhaps less in need of correction than of reassurance. In fact, Matthews observes that while the landless young knights of twelfth-century France had been absorbed into new social arrangements by the later Middle Ages, the English aristocracy of the fourteenth century remained porous and unstable, with knighthood accessible to families of wealth rather than lineage.¹⁹ In contrast to the landless young knights of Chrétien's twelfth-century audience, the *Ywain*-poet writes in a renewed period of relative change, where uncertainty has shifted from the aspirations of an emerging class seeking recognition to the anxieties of an established order facing possible decline.

The sense of instability in aristocratic identity was not confined to literary culture but emerged from a series of structural pressures reshaping English knighthood across the later thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Economic strain, as David A. Carpenter has shown, had already altered patterns of landholding, service, and prestige by the late thirteenth century, placing sustained pressure on local aristocracies and narrowing the material base that traditionally supported knightly status. These pressures did not eliminate knighthood, but they changed the conditions under which it could be practised and sustained.²⁰ This change also coincided with periods of intense and prolonged warfare. Two major conflicts in particular shaped the conditions in which knighthood was practised: the Wars of Scotland (1214–1371), which contributed to the militarisation of England's northern frontier, and the outbreak of the Hundred Years' War (1337–1453). As Ryan P. Naughton observes, during the initial phase of Hundred Years' War, many knights were repeatedly engaged in overseas campaigns, leaving regions of the realm exposed to outlawry.²¹

Andrew Ayton has demonstrated that this is due to the fact that military organisation itself was changing.²² English armies from the 1340s onward increasingly relied on mixed forces of men-at-arms and non-aristocratic professionals, with knights often fighting on foot alongside archers rather than as an exclusively mounted elite.²³ This might have weakened

¹⁶ Albrecht Classen, 'Outsiders, Challengers, and Rebels in Medieval Courtly Literature: The Problem with the Courts in Courtly Romances', *Arthuriana*, 26.3 (2016), 67–90.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Matthews, 'Translation and Ideology', pp. 452–63.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 455–61.

²⁰ David A. Carpenter, 'Was There a Crisis of the Knightly Class in the Thirteenth Century? The Oxfordshire Evidence', *The English Historical Review*, 95 (1980), 721–52.

²¹ Ryan P. Naughton, 'The Construction of Knightly Identity in Late Middle English Romances' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Purdue University, 2010), p. 207.

²² Andrew Ayton, 'English Armies in the Fourteenth Century', in *Arms, Armies and Fortifications in the Hundred Years War*, ed. by Anne Curry and Michael Hughes (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1999), pp. 21–38.

²³ *Ibid.*

the exclusivity of martial distinction as a stable marker of noble identity, as prowess was now exercised within formations that blurred traditional hierarchies of status and role. Anne Curry claims that knighthood in this period carried other responsibilities — including estate management, legal service, and supply — which competed with, and sometimes displaced, the ideal of continuous battlefield presence.²⁴ Kaeuper similarly notes that knights serving as administrators, sheriffs, and tax officials for the crown also engaged in ‘formally illegal acts of violence’ when royal authority failed to serve their interests.²⁵ By the early to mid-fourteenth century, the changes had become so pervasive that, as Maurice Keen notes, ‘fewer men were showing themselves willing to take up knighthood,’ not because warfare had ceased, but because the costs associated with armour, ceremony, hospitality, and social display had become increasingly unsustainable for much of the lesser nobility.²⁶ The result was the emergence of ‘a lesser aristocracy of men’ of knightly lineage who did not themselves take the title.²⁷ Knighthood thus persisted as a nostalgic cultural ideal even as its practical and economic foundations became uneven.

The prolonged absence of knights on foreign campaigns, particularly during the early phases of the Hundred Years’ War, combined with circulating reports of indiscipline and misconduct, appears to have sharpened awareness of the gap between idealisations of chivalry and sociohistorical realities. Jack D. Litchfield remarks that it was precisely amid the growing erosion of martial credibility that a decline in active battlefield knighthood became increasingly perceptible, prompting English literature to turn with renewed intensity to the question of ‘who, and what, a knight might be’.²⁸ In such a context, nostalgia for an earlier and more coherent chivalric ideal may itself have intensified perceptions of crisis, transforming the knight into an especially charged figure through which anxieties about governance and moral authority could be articulated.

Read in this light, the placement of *Ywain and Gawain* within Cotton Galba E.ix is also significant. As a fifteenth-century manuscript miscellany — approximately a century later than the language of the poem — the manuscript consists of theological tracts, political prophecies, and poems on English warfare.²⁹ Copied alongside works such as *The Seven Sages of Rome* (fols. 25v–48v) — a didactic collection of framed moral tales — prophetic texts like the *Prophecies of Merlin* (fols. 49r–50r), Laurence Minot’s eleven alliterative poems on political subjects (fols. 52r–57v), and a poem on the Siege of Calais (fols. 113v–114r), the romance appears within a compilation deeply invested in moral instruction, political commentary, and national conflict. Other materials include moral verses (fols. 48v–49r), *Sir Penay* (fol. 50v), two poems on the Cross (fol. 51v), the *Gospel of Nicodemus* (fols. 57v–66v), short political and moral poems such as *He that casteth off the old and What shall happen as I ween* (fol. 66v), and a verse on the properties of a horse (fol. 113v). Devotional texts, including the *Book of Penance* from the *Cursor Mundi* (fols. 67r–75r), the *Pater Noster* (fols. 73v–75r), and *The Pricke of Conscience* (fols. 76r–113r), frame this political material within

²⁴ Anne Curry, ‘English Armies in the Fifteenth Century’, in *Arms, Armies and Fortifications in the Hundred Years War*, ed. by Anne Curry and Michael Hughes (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1999), pp. 39–68.

²⁵ Richard W. Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 109–12.

²⁶ Maurice Keen, *Chivalry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), pp. 143–45.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Jack D. Litchfield, ‘Knighthood and the Body in Late Medieval English Culture’ (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Leeds, 2021), p. 17.

²⁹ *Ywain and Gawain*, ed. by Friedman and Harrington, pp. ix–xiii.

a penitential and religious register, suggesting that spiritual correction and social order were understood as interdependent in the eye of the anonymous manuscript compiler.

The juxtaposition of so many genres — all sharing a political-didactic undertone — points to a codex concerned less with courtly love than with the moral and political condition of contemporary society. Within this milieu, *Ywain and Gawain* takes on an explicitly ideological valence. The tale of a knight's feral state and subsequent recovery is implicitly aligned with a broader discourse on good governance and the social order. The knight's descent allegorises the incipient decline of the chivalric order, and his healing signifies the restoration of that order through submission to its embodied rituals. However, the evidence discussed in this section warrants caution, as it would be too speculative to trace back the crisis to a single historical moment or happening. On the one hand, the poem's language and adaptation strategies point to a response to fourteenth-century circumstances, when knighthood was increasingly perceived as unstable, economically strained, and ethically compromised. On the other hand, the fifteenth-century manuscript — in which *Ywain and Gawain* is embedded among texts concerned with moral instruction, political prophecy, and good governance — suggests that these concerns continued to resonate at the point of compilation. While it is impossible to reconstruct the intentions of the later compiler or the precise terms of the poem's reception, the manuscript context nonetheless indicates that the romance was read as sharing the same interest in the political discourse. Rather than assuming a shift in meaning between composition and reception, I would more appropriately suggest continuity: the poem's engagement with chivalric crisis appears to have been developed in response to fourteenth-century conditions and subsequently recognised by a fifteenth-century compiler attentive to questions of social order and governance.

Wilderness and Wildness Embodied

In the love-madness episode, Ywain's feral state begins when he fails to keep his vow to his wife Alundyne to return 'on the evyn of Saint Jon' [on the Eve of the Saint John the Baptist's feast].³⁰ When he realises that she has publicly repudiated him, the poet reports that 'an evyl toke him als he stode; / For wa he wex al wilde and wode' [An evil seized him as he stood; / for suddenly he grew all wild and mad].³¹ Throughout this episode, the poem traces Ywain's descent into the wilderness of the forest as coincidental with, but not identical to, the onset of wildness as a mental and affective state. The extent of this distinction, as well as Ywain's degradation, is made clear in the poet's subsequent description of the natural environment, which develops independently of, though in parallel with, his removal from the social world. Ywain abandons all courtly behaviour and withdraws into the forest, where he lives 'Als it wore a wilde beste' [As if he were a wild beast].³² There, he hunts for sustenance, drinks warm blood, and eats roots and raw venison. Nude and estranged from society, the feral Ywain steals a bow and arrows to hunt, consuming the kills raw. His degradation is first witnessed by a hermit, who interprets his state as madness and offers food. From this point on, a pattern of mutual support develops: Ywain provides venison, which the hermit cooks and sells the deer hide in the nearby village in exchange for bread — marking with these actions the first steps toward his rehabilitation. Later, while sleeping beneath a tree, Ywain is

³⁰ *Ywain and Gawain*, l. 1512.

³¹ *Ibid.*, ll. 1649–50.

³² *Ibid.*, l. 1654.

discovered by a maiden who recognises him as Sir Ywain and administers a healing ointment that restores his reason.

The *Ywain*-poet frames the protagonist's transformation as resorting to the tropes belonging to the broader archetype of the wild man — a figure rooted in Biblical, folkloric, and ancient Near Eastern traditions.³³ As Richard Bernheimer notes, the 'ubiquity of the wild man' in medieval culture reflects an older and pervasive archetype with a 'very ancient prehistory'.³⁴ This tradition links animal proximity with monstrosity and madness: features, as maintained by Bernheimer, are primarily the exhibition of the naked body, the fact that he wears no clothes, and the representation of his body as fully covered by hair except on his face, feet, and hands, and sometimes also his elbows or breast.³⁵ In the medieval period, such figures are marked by their nakedness or the garments made of foliage that substitute for clothing, by their strength, and by their inability to engage in rational conduct.³⁶ Their imposing physique and strength become the sign of an inner disorder, embodying the suspension of civilisation and its technical knowledge — including the use of sophisticated weaponry, preparation of food, structured labour, and other markers of human craft and social organisation.³⁷ The idea of the wild man permeates the late medieval British cultural imagination and is indissolubly associated with the incapability of the wild man to 'maintain human posture' — i.e., to stand upright, exhibit the bodily discipline expected of a rational, civilised being.³⁸

The wild man's defectiveness correlates with and is emblematic of his folly as long as the irrationality of the wild man is expressed on a social level. Medieval thinkers did not reason from an evolutionary perspective — which means that their conception of the world could not tolerate a 'missing link' on the continuum between species. Since God made everything as part of his divine design of the world, everything within that design must also have been simultaneously present.³⁹ Ontologically speaking, the wild man cannot precede the civilised, thus becoming a deviation from the human norm.⁴⁰ In the case of Ywain, however, the *Ywain*-poet superimposes the well-established folklore of the wild man onto a chivalric subject, exploiting the tension between knightly identity and bestial disorder. Ywain's temporary wildness demonstrates how the wild man trope can be mobilised to dramatise the collapse of chivalric identity. At this point, Ywain is no longer legible as a knight, and this loss of status is registered through his bodily acts and material conditions.

Insights from embodiment studies can further enrich these observations. Litchfield claims that Middle English literary scholarship does not operate with a unified theory of embodiment but with overlapping frameworks that treat the body as a 'body-self,' a lived subjectivity shaped

³³ A partial account of the debate around mythologies can be found in, e.g., Richard Bernheimer, *Wild Men in the Middle Ages: A Study in Art, Sentiment, and Demonology* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1952), pp. 255–56; Penelope B. Doob, *Nebuchadnezzar's Children: Conventions of Madness in Middle English Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), pp. 54–94; Corinne J. Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance: Avernus, Broceliande, Arden* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993), pp. 10–18; David Quammen, *Monster of God: The Man-Eating Predator in the Jungles of History and the Mind* (London: W.W. Norton, 2004), pp. 225–29.

³⁴ Bernheimer, *Wild Men in the Middle Ages*, p. 94.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Beatrice Mameli, 'Wylde and Wode: Wild Madness in Middle English Literature' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Università degli Studi di Padova, 2014), p. 157.

³⁸ Bernheimer, *Wild Men in the Middle Ages*, p. 7.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 7–8.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

through physiological, psychological, and cultural processes.⁴¹ In this sense, the self is not separable from the body but emerges as a unity of organism, consciousness, and action. Bryan S. Turner argues that practices — combat, courtesy, penance — ‘come to define who and what we are,’ making knighthood not an inherent essence but a social identity enacted through repeated performance.⁴² Naughton puts this bluntly: ‘a knight has to do something knightly’ in order to be legible within the narrative world of romance.⁴³ Identity as performance opens space for a further investigation into embodied practices beyond combat or courtly behaviour. One such practice is eating. Food, like combat, is a bodily act marked by technique, ritual, and symbolic weight.

According to Angela M. Geosits, the symbolic weight of food practices in Middle English romance functions as a broader narrative strategy for articulating identity.⁴⁴ Food becomes especially prominent at moments when a character’s social status, moral disposition, or internal coherence is uncertain. In such instances, eating practices operate not simply as signs but as acts — performed and embodied — that participate in the construction of identity. Because identity in romance is earned through the narrative process — through trial, failure, recovery — bodily acts like combat, penance, and even eating, are central to narrative resolution. Meals in romance texts are not mere background scenes; they stage hierarchies, express virtue or disorder, and mark transitions between wilderness and civilisation. Just as armour and arms define the knight in war, food and its consumption define him in peace. In this sense, food becomes another axis along which knightly identity is constructed and negotiated. The knight’s table manners, his appetite, and his access to certain foods are all culturally loaded acts that reinforce or destabilise his status.

Medieval romances are deeply concerned with change: the trajectory of a romance hero often involves failure or deviation — Ywain is a case in point — but his return to proper conduct re-establishes his identity as a knight. The knight’s body is thus not only the site of performance, but also the instrument through which identity is enacted, tested, and renegotiated. Thus, focusing on embodiment offers a productive method for an enhanced understanding of the material conditions of life — what nourishes, clothes, and sustains the body — as culturally and historically contingent practices.⁴⁵ Physiological events are encoded with social meaning; therefore, reading these embodied experiences reveals not only the extent to which the body and its contexts shape, and are shaped by, the cultural logic of the period but also the discourse(s) they are indexing.

⁴¹ Arthur W. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); as discussed in Litchfield, ‘Knighthood and the Body in Late Medieval English Culture’, p. 13.

⁴² Susan Crane, *The Performance of Self: Ritual, Clothing, and Identity during the Hundred Years War*, The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002); E. Jane Burns, *Courtly Love Undressed: Reading through Clothes in Medieval French Culture*, The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002); Jeffrey J. Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, Medieval Cultures (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); *Gender and the Chivalric Community in Malory's Morte d'Arthur*, ed. by Dorsey Armstrong (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003).

⁴³ Naughton, ‘The Construction of Knightly Identity’, p. 28.

⁴⁴ Angela M. Geosits, ‘The Symbolism of Food and Food Consumption in Middle English Romances’ (unpublished doctoral dissertation, The Catholic University of America, 2017).

⁴⁵ Kathleen Canning, ‘The Body as Method? Reflections on the Place of the Body in Gender History’, *Gender and History*, 11.3 (1999), 499–513. On a similar topic, cf. Caroline Bynum, ‘Why All the Fuss about the Body? A Medievalist’s Perspective’, *Critical Inquiry*, 22.1 (1995), 1–33.

Bios, Zoē, and Bare Life as framework

Giorgio Agamben's distinction between *bios* and *zoē* provides a theoretical lens for reading the representation of embodiment in medieval romance. *Zoē* designates the sheer fact of living, biological existence; *bios* names life qualified and recognised within a political order. Agamben identifies bare life (in it. *la nuda vita*) as the paradoxical condition where life is included in the political order only through its exclusion, as in the figure of *homo sacer*, who may be killed but not sacrificed. As Agamben explains, 'that which is excluded from the community is, in reality, that on which the entire life of the community is founded'.⁴⁶ Bare life thus appears in moments of exception, where sovereignty both withdraws and asserts itself by exposing the body outside its protections. Ruth Evans, in her reading of *Sir Orfeo*, demonstrates how these categories can illuminate medieval romance. She shows how Orfeo's exile stages the tension between sovereignty and bare life: stripped of his kingship, he remains politically charged, his body functioning as the site on which sovereignty is both suspended and reaffirmed.⁴⁷ In Evans's account, the romance imagines sovereignty not as a stable possession but as something revealed in its suspension, at the threshold between political order and abandonment.

In *Ywain and Gawain*, the wilderness episode may be read through this same framework. Ywain's madness marks a passage from *bios* into bare life — not a return to *zoē* as such, since *zoē* designates the biological fact of living shared by all creatures, whereas bare life names the specific condition produced when *bios* is stripped away by a sovereign or juridical act. Ywain does not simply revert to animal existence; he is reduced to it by Alundyne's public repudiation, which functions as a form of outlawry. Stripped of armour, name, and courtly status, he is reduced to mere biological existence, yet his body remains politicised as the very index of knighthood's collapse. As Huot observes:

Madness, as a narrative trope, allows for an examination of identity construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction, and an expropriation of the various factors that are thereby brought into play, such as the perceptions of others, and adversaries to, or violation of, social conventions.⁴⁸

Ywain's derangement thus exposes identity as performative rather than innate: once "one's own role is no longer viable," a form of social-symbolic death follows, abandoning the performance that perpetuates his identity personal narrative.

Like Orfeo, Ywain inhabits a liminal threshold between wilderness and civilisation, a state of exception where law and life overlap but do not coincide. His dereliction — manifest in nakedness, bestial diet, and estrangement from communal bonds — renders him a figure of bare life, excluded from social and political life yet still measured against its norms. Ywain's wildness embodies this paradox, showing how romance stages the ideological tension between the symbolic authority of the knightly body and the monstrosity that emerges when it is stripped of that significance. In this sense, the mad knight does not become a spectacle but an absence: rather than being exhibited as a spectacle, he withdraws from society altogether.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 105.

⁴⁷ Evans, 'Sir Orfeo and Bare Life', pp. 198–9.

⁴⁸ Sylvia Huot, *Madness in Medieval French Literature: Identities Found and Lost* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 180.

⁴⁹ Huot, *Madness in Medieval French Literature*, p. 31.

The figure of the wild man haunts the margins of the English redactor's world, yet without fundamentally threatening its social architecture. The disruption of knightly identity must be read against a broader representational pattern in which bodies outside aristocratic norms are rendered grotesque. Before Ywain's descent into madness, the audience encounters two such figures — the herdsman and the gamekeeper — whose physical descriptions appear to register a latent anxiety about class difference, although without destabilising the existing social order. The herdsman is described as a 'lathly creature' [loathly creature], with 'eres als ane olyfant' [ears like an elephant's] and teeth 'like bare tuskes' [like boar's tusks].⁵⁰ Similarly, the poem's description of the gamekeeper relies on physical revulsion to signal low social status:⁵¹

Swilk mervayle had he of that man;
For he had wonder that nature
Myght mak so fowl a creature

[Such marvel he had at that man; / For he wondered that nature / Might make so foul a creature.]

The repeated marking of such characters as *fowl* or *cherel* surely reinforces the aristocratic perspective from which manual labour and rural subsistence are viewed with contempt. Schiff's notion of 'classist violence' is useful here because — even if the grotesque register used by Sir Colgrevice, knight of the Round Table and cousin to Ywain, to describe the herdsman reveals an elitist view of labour as naturally debased — the figure remains firmly within the economy of the romance.⁵² The grotesque representation of the herdsman, first encountered by Colgrevice, is not a wild man but a hybrid being who fuses natural and human qualities. Unlike Chrétien — where such figures participate in the marvellous economy of romance adventure — the political undertone of the English version relocates them within a recognisably social landscape. In this way, their concreteness emerges over wonder. Being integrated within the social structure of the forest, the herdsman's strangeness — as well as the gamekeeper's — is therefore not construed as monstrous within the narrative logic of the romance.⁵³

In addition to this, the herdsman's ability to control wild beasts without becoming wild himself offers a model of balance between wilderness and civilisation, a successful negotiation between *zoē* and *bios*. By removing the overt hybridisation and giving him a voice — his laconic but firm declaration, 'I am a man', the *Ywain*-poet is still pursuing his agenda.⁵⁴ The English version humanises what in Chrétien had been marvellous, and even mythical, transforming the episode into a meditation on the social contract that sustains civilised life.⁵⁵ For the English poet more than Chrétien, this balance casts Ywain's later fall into stark relief. Whereas the herdsman inhabits the threshold between wilderness and civilisation without losing his selfhood — as it is socially motivated — Ywain's madness represents the collapse of that balance. Unlike the herdsman or the gamekeeper, Ywain is not born into the lower orders: his presence in the same rural setting, though motivated by his madness, signifies his social regression outside the *bios*. Ywain's wildness epitomises what happens when the knightly

⁵⁰ *Ywain and Gawain*, ll. 687, 696, 699; respectively.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, ll. 611–8, 615–7, respectively.

⁵² Schiff, 'Reterritorialized Ritual', p. 233.

⁵³ Cf. Griffin, 'Figures in the Landscape'.

⁵⁴ *Ywain and Gawain*, l. 279.

⁵⁵ Schiff, 'Reterritorialized Ritual', pp. 235–7.

body — supposed guarantor of order and social distinctions between classes — fails to uphold social expectations. In fact, where the herdsman inhabits *zoē* — the embodied fact of living — without having been expelled from a political order he never fully occupied, Ywain's condition is bare life in Agamben's strict sense: the residue produced when *bios* is actively withdrawn. The herdsman's awareness of his social role vis-à-vis Ywain's loss of control thus becomes an index of the poem's underlying political argument: civilisation endures only so long as its agents can perform their duties and maintain the precarious balance between *zoē* and *bios* on which the social order depends.

Social monstrosity and its function

Pushed to its limit, the logic of degradation produces an extreme form of representation, which this article terms social monstrosity. Here, the loss of status renders the knight unclassifiable within any stable normative order — although temporarily. The uncanniness arising from this confusion seems to pertain to the idea that the feral knight embodies a deeper socio-historical significance within his unconventional way of life, which makes him monstrous in the eyes of the audience of the time. Jean-Luc Nancy deepens Agamben's account, in that, whereas bare life names the structural position created by the state of exception, abandonment becomes 'an inevitable condition for our thought'.⁵⁶ This leads to considering the presence of the wild man, as Bernheimer points out, as a 'reminder' of what lies outside the fragile boundaries of order, reason, and Christian civility.⁵⁷ As Bernheimer suggests, then, monsters should be understood as 'epistemological categories', which serve as a symbolic tool of philosophical inquiry.⁵⁸ Charity Urbanski has further emphasised the cultural and epistemological functions of monstrosity, affirming how:

Monsters were representatives of alterity that helped medieval Europeans define their own identities and explore the dialectics of good and evil, civilized and barbaric, self and other, but they were also regarded as portents, as manifestations of God's ineffable power and part of a divine plan.⁵⁹

This understanding of monsters as signs that reveal deeper cultural and theological truths also reflects a much older conceptual framework inherited from antiquity. Medieval European interpretations of monstrosity drew heavily on Greco-Roman traditions, particularly the Greek concept of *teras*, a term referring to omens or physical abnormalities understood as signs through which the gods communicated with humans.⁶⁰

This set of meanings is preserved in English, where the term *monster* derives from Anglo-Norman and Middle French *monstre* or *moustre*, attested from the mid-twelfth century in the sense of 'awe', 'prodigy' or 'marvel,' and later, by the early thirteenth century, referring to a 'disfigured person.' The Latin etymology of the word 'monster' — although disputed —

⁵⁶ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, trans. by Brian Holmes, Meridian (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 36.

⁵⁷ Bernheimer, *Wild Men in the Middle Ages*, p. 2.

⁵⁸ For a full account of the various declensions of monstrosity and their taxonomy cf. David Williams, *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Mediaeval Thought and Literature* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), pp. 3; 13.

⁵⁹ Charity Urbanski, *Medieval Monstrosity: Imagining the Monstruous in Medieval Europe* (London and New York: Routledge, 2024), p. 10.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

suggests the basic idea that a monster is primarily a warning (< Lat. *moneo*, 'to admonish') or a reminder (< Lat. *monstro*, 'to show') — of some underlying threat, disorder, or transgression that challenges the boundaries of the human, the moral, or the natural order.⁶¹ The word's Proto-Indo-European root **men-* is, in fact, likely to have produced the Latin word *mens*, indicating both the mind and the complex of human activities. This semantic field is at the basis of words such as 'mania' but also the Roman spirits of the departed known as *Manes*. All of these are mind-related concepts conveying a sense for which monstrosity serves as a category of perception that concerns extraordinary phenomena.

As such, monsters are elements of the mind; they are inner structures of our thought that have various functions. The first of these is, undoubtedly, to explore the various ways in which one can know, discern, and consequently classify the boundaries of the human, the natural, and the acceptable. Transgressing human categorisations of the experience, monsters create new experiences capable of containing all inconceivable things, and, while exploring them, 'rais[ing] the mind to a higher level of perception of the real'.⁶² Monstrosity also implies that the assessment of their positive or negative value acquires almost a universal significance. It is a moral judgement that is attached to them in consideration of a second important function of monstrosity, i.e., 'recusativity'.⁶³ This term refers to the way monstrous figures provoke cultural self-definition: by standing outside the norm, they force a response that reaffirms or challenges the moral and social boundaries of the community. Monstrosity becomes a model upon which to distinguish what can be acceptable and maintained from what cannot and therefore must be eliminated.

Mary Douglas, in *Purity and Danger*, takes the example of the Old Testament dietary prohibitions in Leviticus to argue that these restrictions are not dictated by a primordial sense of hygiene but, at a deeper level, express a collective moral order. What is deemed acceptable or unacceptable, she suggests, reflects a socially recognised cultural system that regulates the social behaviour of a particular human group.⁶⁴ For Douglas, pollution and taboo arise primarily at moments when classificatory systems are disturbed, when entities do not fit neatly within the symbolic structures through which societies organise the world.

This insight has proven particularly influential for modern monster theory. Building on similar concerns with classification and cultural boundaries, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues that monstrosity frequently emerges at moments of epistemological instability, when established systems of meaning are threatened by figures that resist clear categorisation.⁶⁵ Through his seven theses, Cohen proposes that monsters function as cultural bodies that epitomise the fears, anxieties, and desires of the societies that produce them. Monsters, therefore, appear most forcefully in moments of 'category crisis,' when boundaries between human and animal, civilised and barbaric, or self and other begin to collapse.⁶⁶ Positioned at these thresholds of difference, monsters both destabilise normative systems of knowledge and reinforce them by marking the limits of acceptable behaviour and identity.⁶⁷ Just as forbidden foods are those

⁶¹ Leslie A. Fiedler, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), p. 20.

⁶² Fiedler, *Myths and Images*, p. 16.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* [1966] (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 42–58.

⁶⁵ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)', in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 3–25.

⁶⁶ Ibid., pp. 6–12.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 12–25.

deemed ambiguous and therefore threatening to the integrity of the classificatory system, monstrous figures likewise mark elements that resist categorisation. Their exclusion implicitly communicates the cultural order by rejecting or ostracising such anomalies through the dichotomy of purity and impurity.

Le Goff and Truong assume that the recurrence of monstrosity during the Middle Ages may be explained by the fact that it was perhaps the age in which monsters were most needed, since abnormality in all its forms was as widespread as it was widely despised.⁶⁸ Under the guise of deformity, monsters function as vehicles of a message that has to be deciphered, performing a communicative function. For instance, it was common during the Middle Ages for monsters to be depicted as many-shaped, chimerical, incomplete or otherwise preternatural beings.⁶⁹

According to Isidore of Seville's theory, the category of monstrosity is made of alterations of qualities, deformations of physical or mental features, and combinations of elements that, usually, are separate.⁷⁰ In this view, conceptual thresholds are synonymous with ambiguity and uncertainty, and are thus universally acknowledged as both warnings for potential dangers and sources of impurity. One has therefore to understand the figure of the wild man as simultaneously the embodiment of 'a negative ideal in all its harshness and one-sidedness,' and the exploration of a new possible condition for human existence.⁷¹ Bernheimer emphasises that the wild man 'holds thus a curiously ambiguous and ill-defined position in God's creation' considering that he is neither 'quite man enough to command universal agreement as to his human identity' nor 'animal enough to be unanimously classified as such.'⁷² The inconceivable combination of spheres that should have remained strictly separated characterises the feral man's monstrosity. Accordingly, the wild man becomes the universal archetype of the individual living in the wilderness, losing any civilised features, and looking like a savage beast that, with his too-close relation to nature, embodies the paradoxical union of humanity and animality.

In the same way as the wild man is a reminder of something else, monsters are constructs that exist only in the mind. Monstrosity not only communicates messages and meanings, but it also has an epistemological value. Monsters are a way to explore and know the reality that surrounds human beings, to categorise it and ultimately reject all the elements that cannot be harmonised within the broader symbolic system of the community. In the Middle Ages, the problem has to be intellectually engaged with at a social and psychological level. An individual unable to integrate with the community — with all that entails — could not consequently be considered rational at all.⁷³ Erving Goffman and Michel Foucault, who both explored the interplay between folly and civilisation from a sociocultural perspective, reached the conclusion that what a community considers historically to be a symptom of mental illness is, in reality, better understood as the violation of the commonly accepted rules of everyday life — a violation that leads to an individual's exclusion from society.⁷⁴ The very

⁶⁸ Le Goff and Truong, *Il corpo nel Medioevo*, p. 132.

⁶⁹ Fiedler, *Freaks*, p. 25.

⁷⁰ Williams, *Deformed discourse*, p. 107.

⁷¹ Bernheimer, *Wild Men in the Middle Ages*, p. 4.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Tavistock Publications, 1987); and Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (Milton Park: Taylor and Francis, 2017).

label of 'insanity', as well as that of 'normality', is therefore a tool of both oppression and dehumanisation meant to claim the precedence of the sane over the insane, reinforcing social distinctions and hierarchies.

In the later Middle Ages, living as a civilised being meant, therefore, the full acceptance of the conventions upon which the status quo was founded. On the one hand, these conventions were part of an ethos that included social, moral, religious, and political norms that everyone was supposed to abide by in order to be considered socially acceptable. On the other hand, refusing these constraints by living in the wilderness meant completely losing one's social identity and honour. In *Ywain and Gawain*, this overlap becomes central to the poem's representation of monstrosity, where the knight's madness and his feral state reinforce each other to signify his removal from the realm of the rational and the civilised. That is why Corinne Saunders suggests that thirteenth-century poets often treat this atypical way of life in conjunction with madness, presenting the two as mutually reinforcing.⁷⁵

Ywain: Bare life

Although the Middle English *Ywain and Gawain* is closely based on Chrétien de Troyes' *Yvain, ou Le Chevalier au Lion*, the wilderness episode marks one of the most striking differences between the two versions. The madness episode appears near the midpoint and spans a similar portion of the poem: 216 lines in Chrétien (3.3 per cent of 6,516) and 141 lines in the Middle English version (3.5 per cent of 4,035). The difference in proportional terms and length, therefore, is minimal — amounting to no more than a handful of words all roughly in the middle of their respective poems — and so cannot itself explain the distinctiveness of the English redaction. What matters is how the episode is treated between the two versions. Although both poets portray an almost instantaneous descent into madness, they frame it in different ways. Whereas Chrétien's account captures Yvain's psychological turmoil — a moment in which the protagonist briefly confronts his guilt and self-hatred before reason collapses — the Middle English poet changes the emphasis to focus on Ywain's moral and social rupture. In this way, madness is no longer instantiated as an inward disintegration of the self but an outward, visible breakdown of knightly identity.

A decisive difference between the Old French and the Middle English versions emerges in the speech by the maid sent to court to deliver Alundyne's message. Chrétien articulates, in fact, a meditation on what constitutes 'real love,' insisting that Yvain is like those 'si n'an sevent nes neant.' ['who know nothing about real love'].⁷⁶ Through the maid's words, Chrétien affirms the principle for which 'Cil n'anblent pas les cuersqui ain' ['True lovers don't steal hearts'], on the contrary, 'Li amis prant le cuer s'amie / Ensi qu'il ne li anble mie, / Einz le garde' ['the lover takes his lady's heart [...] but treasures it and guards it'].⁷⁷ Implicitly, the passage translates this accusation into a codification of courtesy. His forgetfulness becomes legible within an affective economy structured by reciprocity and care, reinforced by the image of the lady who 'poinz a / Trestoz les jorz et toz les tans' ['made a mark [...] for every day and season'], as loyal lovers count the days and await their beloved longingly.⁷⁸ The failure is thus primarily as a lover — due to a misunderstanding of love's ethical demands. The Middle English poet,

⁷⁵ Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance*, p. 137.

⁷⁶ *Yvain*, I. 2734; translated text from Cline, *Yvain or The Knight with the Lion*, p. 76.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, II. 2735–37; translated text from Cline, *Yvain or The Knight with the Lion*, p. 77.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, II. 2756–58; translated text from *ibid.*

by contrast, reduces this reflection almost entirely. Ywain's wrongdoing consists in having 'broken þe term þat sho him set' [broken the term that she set for him], and he is declared 'ateyned for trayture, / A fals and lither losenjoure' [Convicted of treason, a false and wicked deceiver], acting 'ful mekyl ogains þe right / To cal so fals a man a knight' [It is greatly against what is right to call such a false man knight].⁷⁹ Everything in this passage resonates less as a lover's lapse than as the breach of a binding agreement — indeed, as treason and falsity. As Hamilton observes, the English poet systematically 'strips [the poem] of special significance to courtly love in order to bring out something else,' shifting the poem's concern toward 'the basis of an honorable society on men of fidelity.'⁸⁰ In this light, the messenger's accusation does not merely condemn defective love; it identifies a disruption of the principle of *trowth* — that verbal fidelity upon which communal life depends. Hamilton further stresses that 'community order depends upon men who fulfil their oaths of fealty,' since 'faithlessness in word eats away such a society at its roots.'⁸¹ The Middle English redaction thus politicises Ywain's failure, presenting his treason as a destabilising force that endangers the chivalric codes sustaining social order.

The political recoding of failure in the Middle English poem becomes even clearer when one turns to the representation of madness. In Chrétien's *Yvain*, the symptoms erupt abruptly emerging from the 'demands of heterosexual and male homosocial structures defining [Ywain's] existence'.⁸² Starting with the aphasia and then the actual loss of his wits, 'Yvains respondre ne li puet, / Que sans et parole li faut' ['Yvain did not reply, for he became devoid of reason and of speech'].⁸³ This moment culminates when 'Lors se li monte uns torbeillons / El chief li monte / Si grant que il forsane' ['A whirlwind broke loose in his brain, so violent that he went insane'].⁸⁴ Yet between these moments, Chrétien introduces a fleeting interval of self-awareness: 'Ne het tant rien con lui meïsme, Ne ne set a cui se confort / De lui qui soi meïsme a mort' ['He hated himself above all else. Although he was near death, he did not know one soul to comfort him.'].⁸⁵ This brief reflection allows readers to glimpse Yvain's consciousness to understand the causes of his troubles before reason gives way to madness. The Middle English poet, by contrast, strips this transformation of the same introspection by simply saying that 'an evyl toke him als he stode; / For wa he wex al wilde and wode / Unto the wod the way he nome' [An evil seized him as he stood; / From grief he grew all wild and mad, / And toward the wood he took his way.].⁸⁶ Here, with no pause for remorse or hatred, madness is less of a process and more of an immediate rupture, which recasts Ywain instantly from knight to a creature reminiscent of the archetype of the wild man. The result is that Ywain's case appears less as a journey away from civilisation and more as a site where the very terms of social identity break down.

The contrast between Ywain before and after this episode warrants close analysis. According to the various descriptions scattered throughout the Middle English text, Ywain's reputation also precedes him. As one character reports, 'Bot talde unto me has it bene, / He

⁷⁹ *Ywain and Gawain*, ll. 1601–2, 1607–8.

⁸⁰ Hamilton, 'The Breaking of the Troth', p. 112.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

⁸² Huot, *Madness in Medieval French Literature*, p. 28.

⁸³ *Yvain*, ll. 2776–77; translated text from Cline, *Yvain or The Knight with the Lion*, pp. 77–8.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, ll. 2806–7; translated text from *ibid.*, p. 79.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, ll. 2792–4; translated text from *ibid.*, p. 83.

⁸⁶ *Ywain and Gawain*, ll. 1651–2.

es the kyng son Uriene' [But I have been told that / He is the son of King Urien].⁸⁷ The verb *talde* emphasises the recognition of Ywain's noble identity within the narrative world. Ywain's marriage to 'the riche lady Alundyne, / The dukes doghter of Landuit' [The noble lady Alundyne, / The duke's daughter of Landuit] further secures his status, aligning him with high nobility through both wealth and lineage.⁸⁸ His social authority is further confirmed when he hosts the marriage at his own residence:

Ful mekil joy Syr Ywayn made
That he the king til his hows hade [...]
The king was thare with his knyghtes
Aght dayes and aght nyghtes.⁸⁹

[Sir Ywain made great joy that / He had the king at his house [...] / The king was there
with his knyghtes / Eight days and eight nyghts.]

The ability to accommodate the king and court — offering 'alkyn gamyn' [all kinds of games] and hospitality — demonstrates his good standing at court as well as his capacity and resources to act as a lord in his own right.⁹⁰ This standing is further reinforced when the poet narrates his captivity in the castle of the Knight of the Well, in which Lunet brings him a meal suited to his noble status:

A capon rosted broght sho sone,
A clene klath and brede tharone,
And a pot with riche wine
And a pece to fil it yne.⁹¹

[She soon brought a roasted capon, / A clean cloth with bread upon it, / And a vessel of
fine wine, / And a cup to fill with it.]

The presence of fine food — roast meat, good quality bread, and wine — and the clothing are markers of aristocratic privilege, which reveals that Ywain is still being treated as a knight of high status. In a different moment, the poet describes Ywain as appropriately outfitted, with 'armurs and al other gere,' [Armour and all other gear] including 'stalworth stedes, both sheld and spere,' [stalwart steeds, both shield and spear] and is accompanied by attendants of varying rank: 'squyere, knave, and swayne' [squire, attendant, and servant].⁹² The presence of all three attendants suggests a well-ordered household: in a previous passage, the squire in training for knighthood is active in preparing his gear — 'The squier has his hernays dyght' [The squire has his armour made ready] — while the knave for menial tasks, a swain likely for field or domestic service as it is required from an affluent aristocrat.⁹³ His status as respectable knight at the court, as demonstrated by his bodily appearance, is therefore unquestionable. In Agamben's terms, the material signs surrounding Ywain denote *bios* — a socially and politically recognised form of life — as opposed to bare life, affirms his continued place within the chivalric hierarchy. For Ywain, fine food, wine, and clothing function as external

⁸⁷ Ibid., ll. 1237–8.

⁸⁸ Ibid., ll. 1254–5.

⁸⁹ Ibid., ll. 1430–1; 1437–8.

⁹⁰ Ibid., l. 1440.

⁹¹ Ibid., ll. 757–60.

⁹² Ibid., ll. 1546–55.

⁹³ Ibid., l. 588.

tokens by which his identity as a knight is recognised and sustained. These details affirm his social identity at this point in the narrative; the force of that identity, however, becomes fully visible only when contrasted with his later descent into a wild and unrecognisable state outside the dominant socio-political order.

Once Ywain fails to fulfil his promise, the transformation begins. In the Old French version, Yvain chooses exile in a 'wild land [...] where no one knew him,' abandons his servants, tears off his clothes, and moves across cultivated fields before reaching the edge of the forest. This extended episode, spanning forty lines, shows his active rejection of courtly structures — not only social ties, but the material signs of his status. The agency behind his departure is explicitly grounded in guilt for breaking the oath with Alundyne: 'Mes ainz voldroit le san changier / Que il ne se poïst vengier / De lui qui j'oe s'a tolue.' ['Yvain began to want to be insane, because he could not find a way [...] so to pay / for having lost his happiness'].⁹⁴ By contrast, in *Ywain and Gawain*, the transition into madness is abrupt. Grief overtakes him, and his madness drives him into the forest, leading him away from all human contact. Ywain simply 'unto the wod the way he nome' [he betook himself into the wood], and 'no man whist whore he bycome' [No one knew what had become of him].⁹⁵ There is no mention of servants, clothes, or any outward signs of courtly identity being cast off — what remains is bare life — a condition that resembles *zoē* but is produced by a different mechanism: not the biological given shared by all living beings, but the politically constituted residuum left when *bios* has been revoked. The body retains the trace of what has been stripped from it. His transformation into a beastlike figure is presented as already complete by the time he steals the bow and arrows, which now occurs within the forest rather than on its edge.⁹⁶ His disappearance is total: 'No man wist whore he bycome' [No man knew where he had gone], and although his men search 'ilka syde' [on all side], they 'findes him noght' [he did not find].⁹⁷ In the woods, he 'welk [...] als it wore a wilde beste' [grew [...] as if he were a wild beast], stripped of speech, purpose, and social ties.⁹⁸ In this way, Ywain stops performing according to his knightly identity, losing all signs of courtly conduct and flees into the wilderness: he no longer bears the marks of knighthood — neither in bearing nor in behaviour. His departure into the forest signals a total collapse of social identity, a regression that is enacted through his body: he wanders aimlessly, disappears from human society, and assumes the life of a naked beast.

To survive in the forest, Ywain robs a poor man of his bow and arrows and turns to hunting. As noted earlier, the wild man is traditionally armed with crude weapons, never with arms derived from metalwork or other forms of sophisticated craft. The bow — despite the fact that arrowheads are made of metals — nevertheless stands in tension with knightly ideals in the case of Ywain. It allows the archer to kill from a distance, avoiding face-to-face combat, which contradicts the chivalric ethos, centred on honourable combat within close physical range. The archer hides and strikes unseen, undermining the code's emphasis on visibility, proximity, and bodily risk central to knightly identity.⁹⁹ While hunting was traditionally an

⁹⁴ *Yvain*, l. 2795–97; translated text from Cline, *Yvain or The Knight with the Lion*, p. 78.

⁹⁵ *Yvain and Gawain*, ll. 1651–2.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, l. 1654.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, ll. 1652–6.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, ll. 1653–4.

⁹⁹ On the incompatibility of missile weapons such as the bow with the ideals of honourable, face-to-face combat that defined knightly identity; cf. Keen, *Chivalry*, p. 169; and Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence*, p. 129.

aristocratic pursuit, celebrated in romance as the moral and symbolic equivalent of armed combat in the form of leisure and display, here it is purposefully stripped of all accoutrements. The poet tells us that 'ilka day than at the leste shot he him a wilde beste' [each day at the least he shot himself a wild beast], and that 'fless he wan him ful gude wane, and of his arows lost he nane' [he gained for himself a good supply of flesh, and he lost none of his arrows].¹⁰⁰ In this romance, the hunt persists only as a mere act of subsistence — severed from the collective rules and symbolic coordination that once defined it as courtly. Hunting, in fact, was conventionally a dense social apparatus with retainers, hounds, horns, regulated spaces, and shared ritualised practices that marked the hunt as a performance of lordship. Following Griffin, the wilderness disrupts the framework that stabilises this elite practice, leaving space instead to the representation of the knight's body as symbolically unreadable within the codes that once affirmed his status. This change strikes at the foundation of his chivalric identity and casts doubt on the very institution of knighthood. Drawing from Hoover's analysis, I suggest that this element does more than evoke animalistic behaviour: it also marks Ywain through low-status weaponry, further destabilizing his social identity.¹⁰¹

Ywain's degradation is also indicated by a life in the forest reduced to raw subsistence: 'thare he lifed a grete sesowne / with rotes and raw venysowne' [there he lived a long season on roots and raw venison.], and most strikingly 'he drank of the warm blode, / and that did him mekil gode' [he drank the warm blood, and it did him much good].¹⁰² The fact that Ywain eats with pleasure raw venison and foraged roots violates both culinary practice and social convention. This imagery would have been especially pointed in the late Middle Ages, a period that inherited and reworked older associations between cooking and social hierarchy. As Jacques Le Goff and Nicolas Truong observe, the emergence of professional cooks, aristocratic cookbooks, and codified table manners all marked a growing distinction between social classes through food.¹⁰³ Cooked meat — particularly lamb and beef — was reserved for the upper classes, while the lower classes subsisted largely on bread and vegetable-based dishes.¹⁰⁴ The anomaly lies less in the consumption of meat than in its uncooked state, which distances him from both peasant subsistence and aristocratic dining practices, aligning him instead with the figure of the wild carnivore. In the context of the poem, food marks thresholds between the human and the animal, the noble and the base, the civilised and the wild. The preparation and consumption of food signal alignment — or misalignment — with cultural expectations, particularly those tied to class, piety, and self-control. Nobles eat in regulated, symbolic ways that efface bodily need; peasants eat out of hunger. Departures from these codes often signal deeper disruptions in the social or moral fabric of the tale. When characters are in transition — undergoing penance, living in exile, or retreating into the wilderness — their eating practices often change accordingly. In these moments, food functions as both a diagnostic and a performative tool: it reveals who a character is becoming and helps constitute that becoming through ritualised, embodied action.¹⁰⁵ The *Ywain*-poet, though, turns this moment into a marker of the protagonist's passage into bare life, where

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., ll. 1663–5.

¹⁰¹ Hoover, 'That knyght that idil lies', pp. 56, 64.

¹⁰² *Ywain and Gawain*, ll. 1667–70.

¹⁰³ Le Goff and Truong, *Il corpo nel Medioevo*, pp. 122–123.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., pp. 118–122.

¹⁰⁵ Geosits, 'The Symbolism of Food and Food Consumption in Middle English Romances', p. 112.

existence is reduced to mere survival and food is divested of its refinement and ritualised, communal forms.

The Hermit: Resocialising Ywain

If *zoē*, stripped from *bios*, is marked by rupture with the norms of medieval civilisation, it can also become the means by which Ywain is re-inscribed into those same norms. In this sense, the turning point of the episode is signalled by the restorative process initiated by the hermit. Aimlessly wandering in the woods, the feral Ywain is eventually seen by a hermit who mistakes him for a wild, possibly dangerous creature. The sight is alarming: ‘A naked man a bow bare’ [A naked man bore a bow], stripped of all clothing and thus of any visible markers of knightly or social identity.¹⁰⁶ The hermit is able to assume madness — ‘He hoped he was wode that tide’ [At that time he thought he was mad] — and, terrified, retreats indoors ‘Forfered of that wode man’ [Terrified of that madman].¹⁰⁷ Yet fear soon gives way to a charitable response. Recognising the wild man’s need, if not his identity, the hermit offers sustenance from a safe distance:

And for him thought it charité,
Out at his window set he
Brede and water for the wode man;
And tharto ful sone he ran.¹⁰⁸

[And because he thought it charitable / He set bread and water out at his window for the wild man; / And very soon he ran to it.]

The hermit opens up a distinction between two creatures belonging to the same ‘species,’ i.e., between what Penelope Doob describes as two apparently irreconcilable models of ferality.¹⁰⁹ The first model is referred to as the negative model, to which Ywain clearly belongs, that of the ‘unholy wild man’, whereas the hermit is ascribable to the positive prototype of the ‘holy wild man’ with its specific characteristics.¹¹⁰ Unlike the unholy wild man, the hermit has wisely chosen a life of spiritual contemplation, extreme poverty, and rejection of worldly temptations, becoming an example of rationality and sanctity.¹¹¹ He can also be read as a reflection of biblical prophets, Arthurian hermits, and hermit saints.¹¹² In this respect, Griffin argues that medieval narratives generate uncanniness not simply through wildness itself, but through instability in classification — moments when it is unclear whether a figure belongs to one category or another.¹¹³ Despite occupying the threshold between civilisation and wilderness, the hermit is spared from collapsing into categorical confusion — unlike Ywain, who can no longer be securely placed within existing social or symbolic categories. This alignment of the hermit with ideas of ascetism allows for a possible identification with

¹⁰⁶ *Ywain and Gawain*, l. 1674.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, ll. 1675–8.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, ll. 1879–82.

¹⁰⁹ Doob, *Nebuchadnezzar’s Children*, pp. 139–40.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 138–39; p. 148.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 135–6.

¹¹³ Griffin, ‘Figures in the Landscape’.

the Church, which, as Schiff argues, plays in the poem a fundamental role in re-establishing the symbolical alliance between knightly and religious orders through ritual exchange.¹¹⁴

Ywain's nakedness serves to emphasise his vulnerability and his diminished social position. Without clothes, Ywain is not able to perform the social function of the knight, being exposed to physical danger and unable to defend himself. As Huot observes, nakedness is both external, as visible nudity, and internal, where symbolically, it signals the stripping away of the social markers that sustain identity, reducing the knight to bare life — the condition Agamben distinguishes from *zoē* precisely because it is the product of exclusion rather than a natural state.¹¹⁵ In this state, the loss of clothing parallels the loss of memory and social recognition, conditions that threaten the continuity of the self by severing one's relation to a shared social context. Furthermore, the naked body is seen with suspicion in the theological debate, oscillating between the state of complete innocence of man before his expulsion from paradise and a more general sinful condition.¹¹⁶ In the latter sense, nudity is negatively connoted, being generally on the side of danger and evil, as it relates to one of the main manifestations of the moral danger constituted by unchastity and eroticism — both characteristics echoed by Bernheimer.¹¹⁷ Clothing, by contrast, is highly functional, as it performs both a protective function, as in the case of knightly attire, and, above all, a social one. Through the clothes one wears, it is possible to construct one's own identity, positioning oneself in a precise segment of the social hierarchy. It is not a coincidence, therefore, that many of the social medieval rituals of investiture move from dressing and undressing.¹¹⁸ For example, knights had to be able to afford a certain attire to be properly considered part of this social class, while kings had to wear new garments as regalia, epitomising their majesty.¹¹⁹

Despite being primarily readable as the effect of love-grief, when placed within the poem's wider political horizon, madness operates less as part of the courtly love discourse and more as a narrative escamotage to make visible Ywain's loss of status. In Maxwell's reading, Ywain's madness emerges through a tight link between grief, memory, and cure. Grief is not an abstract feeling but a physical force that disrupts the body. The poem frames sorrow as responsible for the protagonist's humoral unbalance, which in turn has implications on reason, in line with late medieval medical belief.¹²⁰ Despite being embodied, Ywain's madness is marked by a loss of memory. As Huot argues, body and memory together provide the continuity of the self; once memory fails, the persona disintegrates because the subject can no longer relate to a social context.¹²¹ Forgetting his name, his role, and his past actions therefore signals more than cognitive impairment — it constitutes a form of social-symbolic death, since identity depends upon recognisable participation in shared structures of meaning.¹²² This functions as the primary test of mental stability, so when memory collapses, identity

¹¹⁴ Schiff, 'Reterritorialized Ritual', p. 239.

¹¹⁵ Huot, *Madness in Medieval French Literature*, p. 183.

¹¹⁶ Le Goff and Truong, *Il corpo nel Medioevo*, pp. 124–26.

¹¹⁷ Bernheimer, *Wild Men in the Middle Ages*, pp. 121–75.

¹¹⁸ Le Goff and Truong, *Il corpo nel medioevo*, pp. 124.

¹¹⁹ Cf. for instance: Andrew Ayton, 'Arms, Armour, and Horses', in *Medieval Warfare: A History*, ed. by Maurice Keen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 186–208 (p. 188); and Henry G. Richardson, 'The Coronation in Medieval England: The Evolution of the Office and the Oath', *Traditio*, 16 (1960), 111–202 (p. 143).

¹²⁰ Maxwell, 'Sorrow Wil Meng a Mans Blode and Make Him for-to Wax Wode', pp. 196–197.

¹²¹ Huot, *Madness in Medieval French Literature*, p. 182.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 180.

collapses with it as he forgets his name, his social role, and his past actions.¹²³ Madness, therefore, becomes externally legible allowing other characters to recognise him as mad.

That is why, realising that Ywain may be a madman, the pious hermit is moved to compassion and decides to hand him some fresh water and bread made of barley and chaff, which, the poet remarks, Ywain had never eaten before — supposedly, given his high status.¹²⁴ This also bears spiritual significance, for, by stripping bread of its accidental refinements and reducing it to its simplest form, the poem aligns Ywain's madness with an encounter with bread as substance itself — the body of Christ in the Eucharist — thus turning his feral sustenance into a moment of latent sacramental resonance.¹²⁵ Bread, despite its simple and class-specific, carries profound spiritual significance as a eucharistic symbol.¹²⁶ In fact, as Claire Trenery and Peregrine Horden observe, 'the Sacrament could be given to those who had lost their reason but had formerly shown devotion towards the host.'¹²⁷ The importance of bread is worth considering as the poem juxtaposes its social and Christian symbolism. While Ywain had eaten other kinds of bread throughout the narrative, such as his earlier captivity in the castle of Alundyne, where he was provided with a kind of bread appropriate to his status, he had never eaten coarse barley-and-chaff loaves associated with a poor lifestyle; in his wild state, he learns to value bread as sustenance.

Despite his frenzy, Ywain never forgets the hermit's generosity, so that he returns daily, leaving the spoils of his hunts at the hermit's door to be cooked, their skins sold in the village in exchange for better bread. Apart from being a stock figure in medieval romances, the hermit also raises a further question relating to the spiritual condition of Ywain specifically and of the wild man type more generally. V. A. Kolve notes how, since atheism was absurd in the Middle Ages, the only way to depict it in illuminations of the Psalm (13:1) concerning the topic of folly was in the form of acute madness that often coincides with the wildness.¹²⁸ This happens because, although faith and reason are separated according to the popularised Augustinian formulation, the former enables the latter to function. As Augustine of Hippo writes, '[i]f you will not believe, you will not understand.'¹²⁹ Reason is seen as strictly deriving from faith in God and as an imprecise projection of God's own perfect thought. Hence, Ywain's lack of rationality can be interpreted above all as a lack of faith. This detail must not be overlooked: Ywain's departure from the medieval civilisation epitomised by King Arthur's court seems to indicate also a departure from his knightly state — a profound but unintentional break from the chivalric ideals that once defined his former self. Medieval discourses consistently align madness with the collapse of rational expression; the mad subject is frequently marked by an

¹²³ Ibid., pp. 197–198.

¹²⁴ *Ywain and Gawain*, ll. 1683–4.

¹²⁵ Ibid., ll. 1689–1708.

¹²⁶ On the topic of eucharistic symbolism of the Arthurian matter, see Anita Guerreau-Jalabert, 'Aliments symboliques et symbolique de la table dans les romans arthuriens (XII^e–XIII^e siècles)', *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 47.3 (1992), 561–94.

¹²⁷ Claire Trenery and Peregrine Horden, 'Madness in the Middle Ages', in *The Routledge History of Madness and Mental Health*, ed. by Greg Eghigian (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 62–80 (p. 65).

¹²⁸ Verdel A. Kolve, 'God-Denying Fools and the Medieval "Religion of Love"', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 19.1 (2017), 3–59 (pp. 3–31).

¹²⁹ Augustine of Hippo, *Letters. Volume 2: 83–130*, trans. by Wilfrid Parsons, The Fathers of the Church, volume 18, First paperback reprint (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008), p. 302.

incapacity for articulate speech.¹³⁰ Further, his inability to speak becomes a symptom of his spiritual dislocation, as speech was a marker of reason.¹³¹

Both in the Middle Ages and in romances, it was not uncommon for people to seek out hermits for spiritual guidance. The hermit, though living on the fringes, maintains a remote connection to Church practices and provides a link between structured religious life and the solitary ascetic pursuit. The hermit's intervention in the narrative represents the first stage of Ywain's embodied socialisation process that involves primitive capitalist as well as spiritual dynamics. His madness starts to be healed by reintroducing him gradually into a social context made of different embodied experiences. The hermit in this case is indeed an in-between figure bridging the civilisation of his ecclesiastical status — despite being very marginal — and the isolation of a life conducted outside the community. Peter Haidu argues that the hermit's charity fosters the renewal of Yvain's social habits, and even the brief mention that he sells the leather from Yvain's kills to buy bread points to an underlying system of production and exchange.¹³² However, the hermit's function in this narrative goes beyond that of mediation between two spaces from his liminal position. During the Middle Ages, sanctity and madness were closely associated through the New Testament — particularly 1 Cor. 3 — which frames divine wisdom as worldly foolishness, thereby allowing certain forms of apparent irrationality to acquire spiritual meaning.¹³³ This also meant that medieval thinkers were deeply concerned with distinguishing holy folly from pathological madness, often contrasting illusory fools with those whose derangement marked a genuine break from reason. Within this framework, the holy fool endures suffering consciously, for 'he is aware of the penitential value of his daily ordeal'.¹³⁴ Therefore, the difference between Ywain's and the hermit's solitude is that the latter is chosen and meaningful, while Ywain's is not. In contrast to the hermit, who deliberately retreats into ascetic contemplation, seeking solace and understanding through isolation in the woods afar from mundane distractions of society, however, Ywain's errancy is characterised only by confusion. Unlike the penitential isolation of the holy fool, Ywain's withdrawal lacks intentionality and spiritual discipline, aligning him more closely with actual folly than with sanctified madness. This juxtaposition highlights the underlying contradiction between the two figures: Ywain, unable to perform his knightly duties, is triggered to withdraw from the Arthurian court after the messenger's reminder that he has broken his promise to return to Alundyne; as opposed to the hermit, who, despite being outside society, and a stock figure in medieval romance, also serves as a bridge to the institution of the Church. It is precisely this dual position — at once liminal and yet anchored within the ecclesiastical order — that allows the hermit to act as the first respondent to Ywain's condition, recognising his disordered appearance as a visible sign of withdrawal from the social community.¹³⁵

A noteworthy difference between the French and English versions lies in the tone of the encounter. In Chrétien's *Yvain*, the hermit's charity remains cautious and distanced: he prays for Yvain's protection but also for his absence: 'Prie Deu, quant aler l'en voit, / Qu'il le desfande et qu'il le gart / Que mes ne vaingne cele part ['He prayed the Lord God would

¹³⁰ Huot, *Madness in Medieval French Literature*, p. 1.

¹³¹ Cf. Kolve, 'God-Denying Fools'; especially, the discussion of feeble-mindedness and mutism as correlates on p. 27.

¹³² Peter Haidu, 'The Hermit's Pottage: Deconstruction and History in *Yvain*', *Romanic Review*, 74 (1983), 1–15.

¹³³ Huot, *Madness in Medieval French Literature*, pp. 18–9.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹³⁵ *Ywain and Gawain*, l. 1675.

bestow protection on the lord Yvain and not let him come back again’].¹³⁶ His prayer and the resulting acts of charity — though sincere — suggests fear as well as a guarded form of care — perhaps in the hope that the knight’s eventual transformation will render his return unnecessary. Here, the hermit fulfils his duty but seeks to keep the mad knight at a distance. After this moment, in the English redaction, the knight abandons his initial aggressiveness and allows a space in which a relationship with the hermit is possible. As he consumes the bread, Yvain not only nourishes his body but also opens himself to healing. Gradually, he sheds his wildness, embracing the hermit’s guidance. In this way, Yvain is reconnected to his human existence, leading him back to a recovery of his *bios* — the position within the social and spiritual order.

The Maiden: Recovering the bios

While the hermit plays a fundamental role in providing the first aid Yvain needs, intuitively reintroducing him to basic social rituals, the final stage of his healing is carried out by the maiden, who discovers him asleep beneath a tree and immediately recognises him as the knight he once was. The second phase of the healing process begins with the intervention of the maiden, who not only acknowledges Yvain’s humanity but also acts as the agent of his cure. In both Chrétien’s and the Middle English version, the recognition and recovery scene follows a similar narrative sequence: the hero is discovered in his degraded state, identified through the scar on his face, and restored through the application of Morgan the Wise’s magical ointment.

A significant divergence from Chrétien emerges at precisely this point: whereas the French version seems more interested in the anagnorisis rather than the diagnosis – the discovery of the hero’s true identity rather than what caused his state — the Middle English poet markedly compresses the scene. In seeing him, the maiden’s reaction signals a certain degree of shock in *Yvain*, where she laments: ‘Allas, [...] / So nobil a knyght als he was kyd’ [Alas, [...] / He was known to be such a great knight].¹³⁷ The depth of his social degradation lies not only in his physical appearance — now unpleasant — but in the contrast between his former chivalric identity and his present abjection: ‘It es grete sorow that he sold be / So ugly now opon to se’ [It is great sorrow that he should be so ugly now to look upon].¹³⁸ Here, Yvain is represented as an ugly being, which had appeared elsewhere in the poem only in relation to figures like the gamekeeper and the herdsman. His madness is explained not in supernatural terms but as the product of love-grief: ‘Sorow wil meng a mans blode / And make him forto wax wode’ [Sorrow will mingle a man’s blood and make him grow mad].¹³⁹ In *Yvain*, Chrétien, in fact, describes the prolonged inspection of the naked body, the delayed recognition through the scar, the maiden’s ride back to the lady and the lengthy recount of the discovery.

Also, in the English version, the maiden moves almost immediately from identification to diagnosis, transforming the moment of discovery into a clinical assessment. Her observation that ‘sorow wil meng a mans blode / And make him forto wax wode’ [‘Sorrow will mix a man’s blood / and cause him to become mad.’] reframes madness within a humoral model, expanding the moment more distinctively from the more concise assessment in the original

¹³⁶ *Yvain*, ll. 2864–6; translated text from Cline, *Yvain or The Knight of The Lion*, p. 80.

¹³⁷ *Yvain and Gawain*, ll. 1726–30.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 1729–30.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, ll. 1739–40.

('An puet bien de duel forsener' ['people lose their minds from grief']).¹⁴⁰ Such a formulation reflects medieval medical treatises that interpret madness through the language of humoral imbalance, locating the disorder within the material body rather than in purely moral failure.¹⁴¹ At the same time, medieval thought frequently aligns madness with transgression, treating it as a condition that exposes the fragile boundaries governing social and ethical behaviour.¹⁴² Because madness is understood as an embodied condition, recovery must proceed by restoring memory before identity. For Maxwell, this sequence is decisive: madness originates in grief, takes form as amnesia, and can only be reversed through female knowledge capable of addressing both the emotional cause and the bodily treatment of the disorder.¹⁴³

Accordingly, she brings him an appropriate 'atyre' [attire] consisting of a full set of rich clothing, stockings, shoes, shirt, breeches, a rich robe, a silk belt, and a horse.¹⁴⁴ These are all markers of courtly civilisation, and their reapplication to the body functions as a kind of cultural rehabilitation: she lays the garments beside him without forcing the act, allowing him to re-dress himself — an act of agency crucial in reclaiming his own identity.¹⁴⁵ In this moment, Ywain recovers his *bios*: the qualified life that marks him as a knight within the chivalric order. With *bios* restored, his rationality returns as well, together with the faculty of the word — the capacity for reasoned speech that distinguishes him once more as a member of the courtly and political community. The gendered identity of the maiden in this process is significant: her intervention not only enables Ywain's individual restoration but also anticipates the larger reconciliation between the sexes, completed later in the poem through Alundyne's forgiveness.

In this sense, the maiden's role can be read structurally as the inverse of the earlier messenger whose speech precipitated the hero's madness. Where the messenger's words publicly revoke Ywain's place within the courtly and marital order — stripping him of honour and the ring symbolising that honour — the maiden's intervention works to restore that same order at the level of the body. If the messenger officialises the rupture, the maiden effects its repair through the signs substantiating his knightly status. Thus, the recovery of the knight is simultaneously the recovery of that same order that, in the eyes of the anonymous poet and his audience, binds together the community and reaffirms the structures of civilisation that his madness had temporarily undone.

Conclusion

This article set out to explain why the wilderness episode in *Ywain and Gawain*, though closely patterned on Chrétien's *Yvain*, feels like a different kind of narrative event. By tracking the poem's symbolic and material markers of transformation — appearance, food, weaponry, clothing, and the handling of marvellous and religious encounters — I showed that the Middle English redaction does not treat madness as Chrétien does. Where Chrétien stages a crisis of interiority in which guilt and self-hatred briefly remain symbolically readable before reason collapses, the English poet externalises the breakdown. Madness becomes an

¹⁴⁰ Respectively: *Ywain and Gawain*, ll. 1793–94; and *Yvain*, l. 2930; translated text from Cline, *Yvainor The Knight of The Lion*, p. 82.

¹⁴¹ Huot, *Madness in Medieval French Literature*, pp. 12–4.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁴³ Maxwell, 'Sorow Wil Meng a Mans Blode and Make Him for-to Wax Wode', pp. 206–207.

¹⁴⁴ *Ywain and Gawain*, ll. 1769–73.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, l. 1774.

outward, publicly legible rupture: the visible loss of knightly identity. In this way, Ywain's wildness does not simply interrupt order; it renders the conditions of order newly visible.

What makes this shift decisive is the poem's political recoding of failure. The English redactor reduces courtly discourse and domesticates the marvellous, and in doing so displaces an ethic of love with a language of trowth. Ywain's lapse is framed less as defective loving than as breach, falsity, and the threat posed by the errant knight who slips beyond the structures that confer meaning on his status. The wilderness episode, therefore, becomes the symbolic core of the poem's political allegory: a crisis-and-remediation plot in which the wild knight figures the danger of a life no longer contained by recognisable obligations and hierarchies. The social monstrosity is produced by the way in which the knightly body is rendered unreadable once it no longer bears the signs of its dignity and authority.

Agamben's distinction between *bios* and *zōē* is crucial here because it clarifies the logic by which the poem makes its argument. The episode stages exclusion as a founding gesture: Ywain's withdrawal into the forest — his loss of name, rank, reason, and the regulated practices that make a knight — enacts the production of bare life: the condition that emerges when *bios* is revoked, leaving not *zōē* but a politically marked remainder that bears the trace of what has been stripped away. That separation is a narrative necessity, since only by suspending *bios* can the poem reconstruct and reaffirm it. When Ywain is reinserted into medieval social order, the restoration does not merely cure him; it reattaches him to the embodied signs and relations that make him socially intelligible. For as profound as the crisis may seem, chivalry as well as the order that sustains it shall survive.

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