

# Blurring the Boundaries of Culture and Nature in *Ywain and Gawain*<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *Ywain and Gawain* narrates Ywain's knightly adventures due to which he is spiritually transformed into a perfect knight. His adventure begins with his departure from Arthur's court with the intent of avenging his cousin Colgrevice upon hearing his anecdote of combat with a knight and his subsequent defeat. At the beginning of Ywain's journey, culture/nature binary opposition becomes visible with the sudden change in topography from the civilised court to the wilderness. According to anthropocentrism, culture and nature are often thought to be separate from each other and dichotomous. At first glance, it seems that *Ywain and Gawain* also adopts such an anthropocentric viewpoint, that is, culture predominates nature. However, it can be observed that culture/nature binary opposition and its rigid definitions are challenged and blurred throughout the romance. In this regard, this paper aims to explore *Ywain and Gawain*'s treatment of culture/nature binary opposition and analyse how the narrative challenges the strict boundaries of these two concepts through the lens of Donna Haraway's term "natureculture(s)" which acknowledges the inseparability and equal importance of culture and nature.

**Keywords:** *Ywain and Gawain*, Donna Haraway, natureculture, dualisms, medieval romance

Culture and nature have long been conceived as separate and opposing realms in traditional Western thought. This divide has severely

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<sup>1</sup> This article is the improved version of the paper presented by both authors at International Medieval Congress, Leeds on 5-9 July 2021.

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impoverished our knowledge practices and generated a false dualistic understanding that elevates culture above nature while reducing nature to a controllable object. Numerous scholars from different fields, including feminist theory, ecocriticism, and science studies, have sought to interrogate the historical roots of the culture/nature dichotomy that has permeated the Western thought for so long. A thorough explanation in this direction has come from the environmental philosopher Val Plumwood, who claims that the roots of this binary divide can be traced back to Platonic rationalism and Cartesian thinking which constructed nature in opposition to reason:

Nature, as the excluded and devalued contrast of reason, includes the emotions, the body, animality, the primitive or uncivilized, the non-human world, matter, physicality and sense experience, as well as the sphere of irrationality, of faith and of madness. In other words, nature includes everything that reason excludes. (Plumwood 1993, 16-17)

For Plumwood, such a type of hierarchical thinking has allowed the otherisation of nature and paved the way for a series of binaries to flourish, such as human/nature, human/non-human, and culture/nature. In any binary opposition, as she explains, the first term is always prioritised over the second and therefore becomes dominant. Within this framework, culture, which is associated with mind, reason, and civilisation, is perceived as being superior to nature, which is associated with irrationality, non-human, and wilderness. Although the dichotomy of culture and nature has been, to use Plumwood's (1993, 196) terms, "the master story of western culture," it is now, as she asserts, a "disabling" one. What we need is new lines of inquiry and new stories that bridge the gap between "the cultural" and "the natural" by emphasising their interrelationality. Thus, we claim that one way to achieve this is through Donna Haraway's concept of natureculture(s).

Haraway first introduced this term in her influential publication *The Companion Species Manifesto* and later further elaborated on it in *When Species Meet*. She has never defined explicitly what she means by natureculture(s); however, her concept has become the focus of much attention, and it has opened up an innovative critical pathway that necessitates a rethinking of the boundaries between the ecological and the social, the material and the discursive, the human and the non-human, and the bodily and the mind. As Kevin O'Brien (2004, 298) also observes,

Her [Haraway's] work is not always clear on whether 'nature' and 'culture' should ever be talked about as distinct entities at all; in some writings she seems to imply that all that is, is natureculture, while others point to naturecultures as a grey area between nature and culture. What seems most important, however, is the point that the worlds we refer to with 'nature' and 'culture' are fundamentally inseparable: we live inevitably among, within, and as naturecultures.

To put it simply, for Haraway, nature can never be disentangled from culture and vice versa. Both spheres are inextricably linked and must be thought through one another. In one of her interviews, Haraway (2000, 50) explains the driving force that led her to question the conventional dualistic worldview in developing her concept:

From the beginning and to the present, my interest has been in what gets to count as nature and who gets to inhabit natural categories. And furthermore, what's at stake in the judgment about nature and what's at stake in maintaining the boundaries between what gets called nature and what gets called culture in our society. And how do these values flip? How does this very important dualism in our cultural history and politics work between nature and society or nature and culture?

In examining *Ywain and Gawain*, we also reflect on similar questions and endeavour to offer an innovative reading that occasions new interpretations of culture and nature in *Ywain*. At first glance, the romance seems to adopt the culture/nature dichotomy profoundly embedded in traditional Western thought. Nevertheless, on closer examination, we have realised that the rigid distinction between culture and nature, in fact, is blurred and challenged in specific parts of the romance.

To summarise briefly, *Ywain and Gawain* narrates Ywain's knightly adventures during which his journey of spiritual and martial perfection can be observed. Typically, romances begin with the protagonist knight's departure from the court to accomplish a task, to complete a quest, or to seek adventure. Similarly, in this romance, Ywain's motivation to leave the court is to avenge his cousin Colgrevice, who was defeated by the guardian knight of the fountain six years ago. Ywain starts his journey for revenge by setting forth into the forest as his cousin Colgrevice did. Ywain follows Colgrevice's steps in the forest and describes the places he passes by as untouched and wild:

He thoght to be wele on hys way,

Or it war passed the thryd day,  
And to asay if he myght mete  
With that ilk narrow strete  
With thornes and with breres set,  
That mens way might lightli let,  
And also forto fynd the halde,  
That Sir Colgrevice of talde. (*Ywain and Gawain* 1995, lines 549-556)

The depiction of the paths in the forest implicates the hardships of his journey and tasks he will encounter. The description of “narrow strete/With thornes and with breres set” indicates the sudden change from the civilised court to the wilderness. This abrupt alteration in topography emphasises culture/nature binary opposition and prioritises culture over nature.

The superiority of culture over nature tends to be used frequently in the spaces of chapel and forest Ywain occupies. The wilderness is associated with nature while culture with chapel, castle, and court:

He passed many high mowntayne  
In wildernes and mony a playne,  
Til he come to that lethir sty,  
That him byhoved pass by.  
Than was he seker for to se  
The wel and the fayre tre.  
The chapel saw he at the last,  
And theder hyed he ful fast.  
More curtaysi and more honowre  
Fand he with tham in that toure,  
And mare conforth by monyfalde,  
Than Colgrevice had him of talde. (*Ibid*, lines 597-608)

As the lines above narrate, Ywain finds comfort and courtesy in the chapel after he suffers from the harsh conditions the wilderness brings about. Here, nature is filled with pejorative meanings. That is, it is disparaged on the grounds that it is dangerous, wild and deprived of the court’s civilised manners, security, courtesy, and comfort.

In the following part of the romance, culture/nature binary evolves into another extension, which is reason/insanity. To exemplify, Ywain leaves Alundyne to follow his chivalric endeavours and go on tournaments and jousts on the condition that he returns within a year. Yet, he is so occupied with these knightly pleasures that he fails to keep true to his oath. One day, a lady curses him due to his

forgetfulness and unloyalty to Alundyne and calls him a traitor. Ywain goes insane out of woe and escapes into the depths of the forest:

Unto the wod the way he nome;  
No man wist whore he bycome.  
Obout he welk in the forest,  
Als it wore a wilde beste;  
His men on ilka syde has soght  
Fer and nere and findes him nocht. (Ibid, lines 1651-1656)

Ywain wanders around the forest where he is identified with a “wild beast.” His fellow knights look for him, yet they cannot find him. When Ywain loses his reason and becomes almost a wild beast, he stands for the nature part in the culture/nature dichotomy. Because the knights searching for Ywain still belong to the civilised world and represent the culture part of this binary, they cannot find him at all. All these examples affirming the anthropocentric idea of the superiority of culture over nature seem to dominate the romance from the beginning. As Haila (2000, 155) states, “‘Culture’ [in dualistic thinking] is often equated with all human artifact, and “nature” with the external environment, that is, culture and nature are distinguished from each other as if they were two separate realms of reality.”

However, on closer examination of *Ywain*, it is evident that there is not a definite boundary separating these two concepts and pitting culture against nature. Although the beginning of the romance is permeated with these traditional dualisms of culture/nature, these concepts are presented as enmeshed instead of being dichotomous entities. They are stringently intertwined with each other, and thus, they cannot be thought to be disentangled from each other. In this respect, Ywain’s encounter with the hermit is a significant example in which the clear-cut distinction between the notions of culture and nature has dissolved:

Als he went in that boskage,  
He fand a litil ermytage.  
The ermyte saw and sone was war,  
A naked man a bow bare. (Ibid, lines 1671-1674)

At first, the hermit fears Ywain and escapes from him into his hermitage since Ywain appears like a dangerous beast. Ywain’s encounter with the hermit uncovers several extensions of the binary

opposition culture/nature such as tame/wild and civilised/uncivilised. However, the components of these binaries are not sharply defined.

For instance, the hermit lives a solitary life in the middle of the forest. Though his motivation to lead a life of a recluse is not mentioned in *Ywain*, it is known that hermits generally choose eremitical life for religious purposes, and they sometimes intend to live away from the tumult of the city. Nevertheless, they cannot be considered totally separate from the social life in the city despite living as recluses away from the urban life. Dhira Mahoney (1987, 1-2) explicates, “Despite being withdrawn from society, hermits and anchorites were part of the fabric of social life. Indeed, their particular distinction was their dual identity, their position both on the margins of society and in the very heart of it.” Mahoney’s comment on the eremitical life demonstrates that hermits contain a dual identity, that is, they live both in the centre and the periphery. Congruently, the hermit in *Ywain* has isolated himself from the hubbub of city life and lives as a wild man in the forest. Yet, he builds a hermitage there, which is a civilised and secure place for him to live in the wilderness. He also frequently visits the city to sell animal skins and buy bread:

Than went the ermyte to the towne  
And salde the skinnes that he broght,  
And better brede tharwith he boght;  
Than fand Sir Ywayne in that stede  
Venyson and better brede. (*Ywain and Gawain* 1995, lines 1702-1706)

Thus, the hermit, attaining a dual identity, both lives as a recluse solitarily in the forest and also visits the city when he needs. In the same manner, the forest is a wild space, yet it also contains the traces of civilisation. Therefore, the forest cannot be considered a mere wilderness since it has the outposts of civilisation such as the hermitage. In the light of these, it can be asserted that both the hermit and the forest represent the synthesis of culture and nature, and they may be considered the embodiment of natureculture within the framework of Haraway’s concept.

As aforementioned, the extension of culture/nature binary opposition, that is, reason/insanity, reveals itself again. Yet this time, they are not presented as separate and hierarchical; on the contrary, they are represented as equally significant entities. To give an example, a woman sees Ywain, who sleeps under a tree, and she identifies Ywain thanks to his scar. She applies an ointment given by

Morgan the Wise to Ywain to heal his insanity while he is asleep. She leaves some clothes for Ywain to get dressed once his mental health is recovered. Now that the magical ointment is applied to him, he regains his wits and acquires his reasoning skills. First, Ywain falls under the category of insanity and nature; thus, he does not need to get dressed. As culture is often associated with reason, he needs his clothes to be accepted as a member of and associated with culture again:

Al his atyre sho left hym by  
At his rising to be redy  
That he might him cleth and dyght,  
Or he sold of hyr have syght. (Ibid, lines 1785-1788)

In this incident, the concepts of culture and nature seem to be separated distinctly, yet Ywain owns both the traces of culture and nature. Like the hermit, Ywain becomes the embodiment of the synthesis of culture and nature.

Ywain's relationship with the lion can also be analysed as a fundamental example of the dissolvment of the terms, namely, culture and nature. In most cases, non-human animals are recurrently used in romances either as helpers or challengers to the knights. Thus, the relationship between the knight and the animal is often hierarchical. The animal's *raison d'être* in the romance is the knight. Therefore, it is presented at the periphery. In this context, the lion in *Ywain* is commonly analysed as a helper to Ywain, which always follows him and aids him in his battles loyally. Ywain's rescuing the lion from the dragon and the lion's thanking him by bowing is given as an example to such analyses:

Bot the lyoun wald nocht fyght.  
Grete fawnyng made he to the knyght.  
Down on the grund he set him oft,  
His fortherfete he held oloft,  
And thanked the knyght als he kowth,  
Al if he myght nocht speke with mowth;  
So wele the lyon of him lete,  
Ful law he lay and likked his fete. (Ibid, lines 2001-2008)

The lion kisses Ywain's feet to thank him. Many scholars discuss the lion's bowing to Ywain and kissing his feet and consider these actions as Ywain's superiority to the lion:

The lyoun folowd by hys syde.

In the forest al that day  
The lyoun mekely foloud ay,  
And never for wele ne for wa  
Wald he part Sir Ywayn fra. (Ibid, lines 2012-2016)

The lion's loyalty to and following him endlessly also reinforce such claims. Nevertheless, on deeper examination, the superiority of Ywain to the lion or the inferiority of the lion proves quite problematic. Despite anthropocentric comments on non-human animals in medieval texts, the hierarchy in the relationship of Ywain and the lion is not too simple to be generalised, on the contrary, it is quite multifaceted.

The dynamics of their relationship display that there are not distinctly defined roles they assume. For instance, when the lion becomes very hungry, it goes hunting, kills a doe and drinks its blood. Then, it takes the remains of the doe to Ywain. Ywain takes it, builds a fire, and roasts the meat for the lion and himself:

A loge of bowes sone he made,  
And flynt and fire-yren bath he hade,  
And fire ful sone thare he slogh  
Of dry mos and many a bogh.  
The lion has the da undone;  
Sire Ywayne made a spit ful sone,  
And rosted sum to thaire sopere.  
The lyon lay als ye sal here:  
Unto na mete he him drogh  
Until his maister had eten ynogh.  
Him failed thare bath salt and brede,  
And so him did whyte wine and rede;  
Bot of swilk thing als thai had,  
He and his lyon made tham glad. (Ibid, lines 2037-2050)

In this scene, they work and eat together. Hence, the hierarchical relationship the binary opposition culture/nature generates is distorted once more.

Furthermore, Ywain does not disregard the lion's agency and freedom, and he displays it by treating it as an individual with its own free will. Ywain does not abuse the lion in any means. For example, Ywain does not force the lion to fight for his own battles. When Ywain is requested not to include the lion in his battles, he considers the lion an individual who makes its own decision: "'Do oway thi lioun,' said the steward, 'For that es noight oure forward./ Allane sal thou fight



with us thre” (Ibid, lines 2571-2573). Ywain’s reply lays bare his thoughts on the lion:

And unto him thus answerd he,  
‘Of my lioun no help I crave;  
I ne have none other fote-knave;  
If he wil do yow any dere,  
I rede wele that ye yow were’. (Ibid, lines 2574-2578)

The lion is not treated as a mere non-human helper to Ywain (Pekşen Yakar 2022, 34). They share a mutual relationship that denies a master/servant dichotomy. Moreover, at the end of the romance, they become inseparable, which also signifies the inseparability of culture and nature, and human and non-human.

In conclusion, this paper analyses the culture and nature binary opposition and its extensions in *Ywain and Gawain* by exploring the descriptions of the concepts of culture and nature and their interpretations in the romance. By discussing the uses of the concepts of nature and culture in the text, we demonstrate that these dualistic constructs do not follow the principles of traditional Western dualistic thinking, thus, they are not organised hierarchically. On the contrary, the concepts of culture and nature are entangled with and cannot be thought separately from each other. In this context, we employ Donna Haraway’s ground-breaking term of natureculture(s) reinforcing our argument that these concepts are used as equally important entities and enmeshed with each other, which blurs strict boundaries.

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