Sir Gawain in the Greenwood:
Chivalric Romance Meets Medieval Outlaw Traditions

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ABSTRACT

We normally do not talk about Sir Gawain, the paragon of Arthurian chivalry, in the same breath as medieval outlaws; however, several scholars have observed that Gawain repeatedly violates the tenets of the Pentecostal oath in Sir Thomas Malory's fifteenth-century *Le Morte Darthur*. It seems that no matter what outrages Gawain may commit, he will never be removed from the Round Table, for as Paul Rovang notes, Gawain "enjoys complete immunity . . . because he is Arthur's nephew" (32). Yet in the first book of Malory's *Morte*, Gawain is declared an outlaw. Sir Uwaine has been exiled after his mother, Morgan le Fay, commits treason against Arthur, and when Gawain learns of his cousin's exile, Gawain declares that "'whoso banyshth my cosyn jarmayne shall banyshe me'" (122.31-33). Of course, Gawain, not the king, is the one to declare himself an outlaw, but as he and his cousin depart the court, they head not to another country but into the forest.

Historian Maurice Keen, in his 1961 monograph *The Outlaws of Medieval Legend*, argues that the Greenwood is only a temporary space traversed by knights in medieval chivalric romance, noting that "For Arthur and his knights the forest marked the boundary of an unknown world where the laws did not run and where wicked men and strange spirits found a refuge"). I propose to examine Gawain's brief outlawry in light of the outlaw tradition. Unlike Robin and his Merry Men, Gawain departs from and returns to the court rather than the forest; nonetheless, can we consider Malory's forests as a type of Greenwood? Given that the Greenwood is, as Keen notes, "an asylum from the tyranny of evil lords and a corrupt law" for Robin Hood, I argue that something similar emerges when we consider Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* as a hybrid of Arthurian and Greenwood Matters.

Preliminary Questions:

- What happens when we read Gawain as an outlaw, particularly in his role in seducing Lady Ettarde and betraying Sir Pelleas?
- What sort of social commentaries become visible through this lens?
- How do Gawain's behaviors in the forest compare to his behaviors at court?

LOCATING THE GREENWOOD

greenwood, *n.*

1. A wood or forest in leaf. Also (now archaic) with reference to the forest as a refuge for outlaws, hence *to go to the greenwood*: to become an outlaw.

1275—1995

OED Oxford English Dictionary
The definitive record of the English language

forest, *n.*

1.a. An extensive tract of land covered with trees and undergrowth, sometimes intermingled with pasture

a1375—1875

2. *Law*. A woodland district, usually belonging to the king, set apart for hunting wild beasts and game, etc.; having special laws and officers of its own.

1297—1883

METHODOLOGY

- Close reading of Book 1 (*King Uther and King Arthur*) of Malory's *Le Morte Darthur,* with heightened attention to references to forests and descriptions of Sir Gawain
- Review of existing scholarship on forests in genre of medieval romance
- Examination of Malory's primary source for Book 1, the thirteenth-century Post-Vulgate *Suite du Merlin,* to determine Malory's changes

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

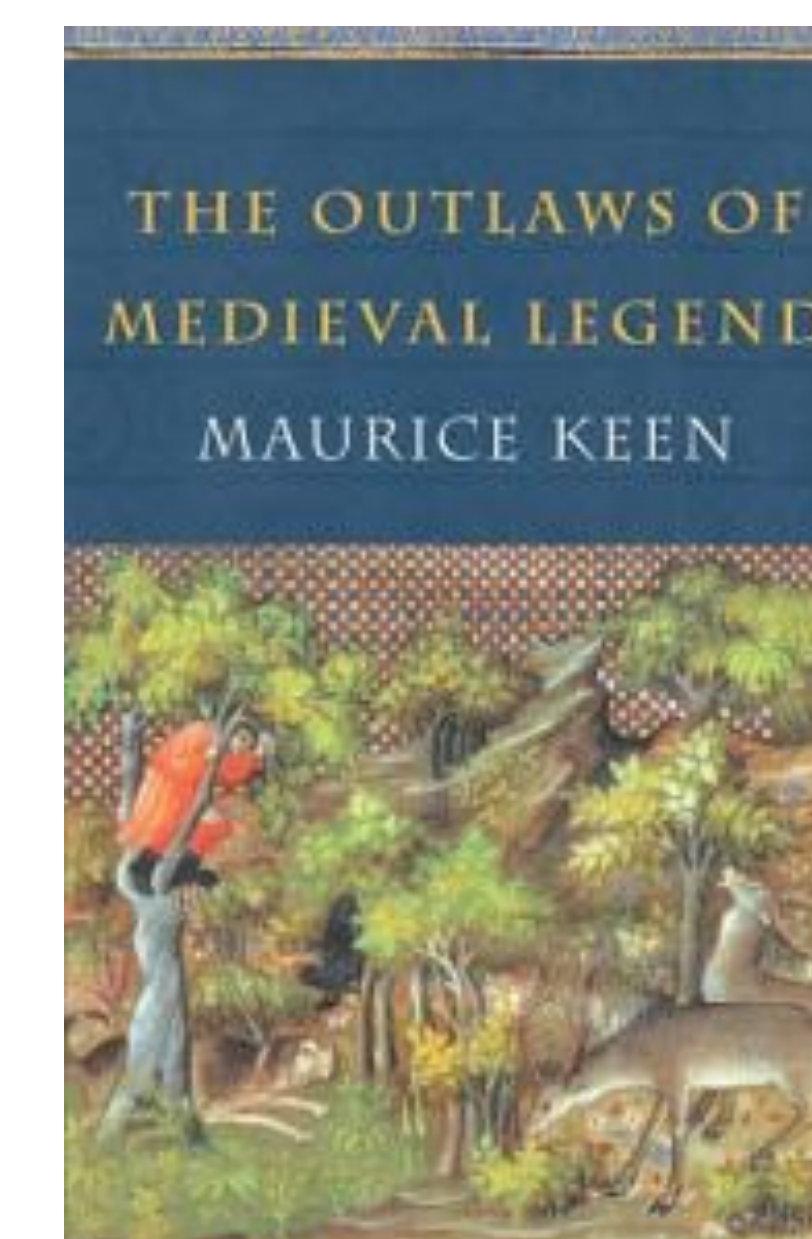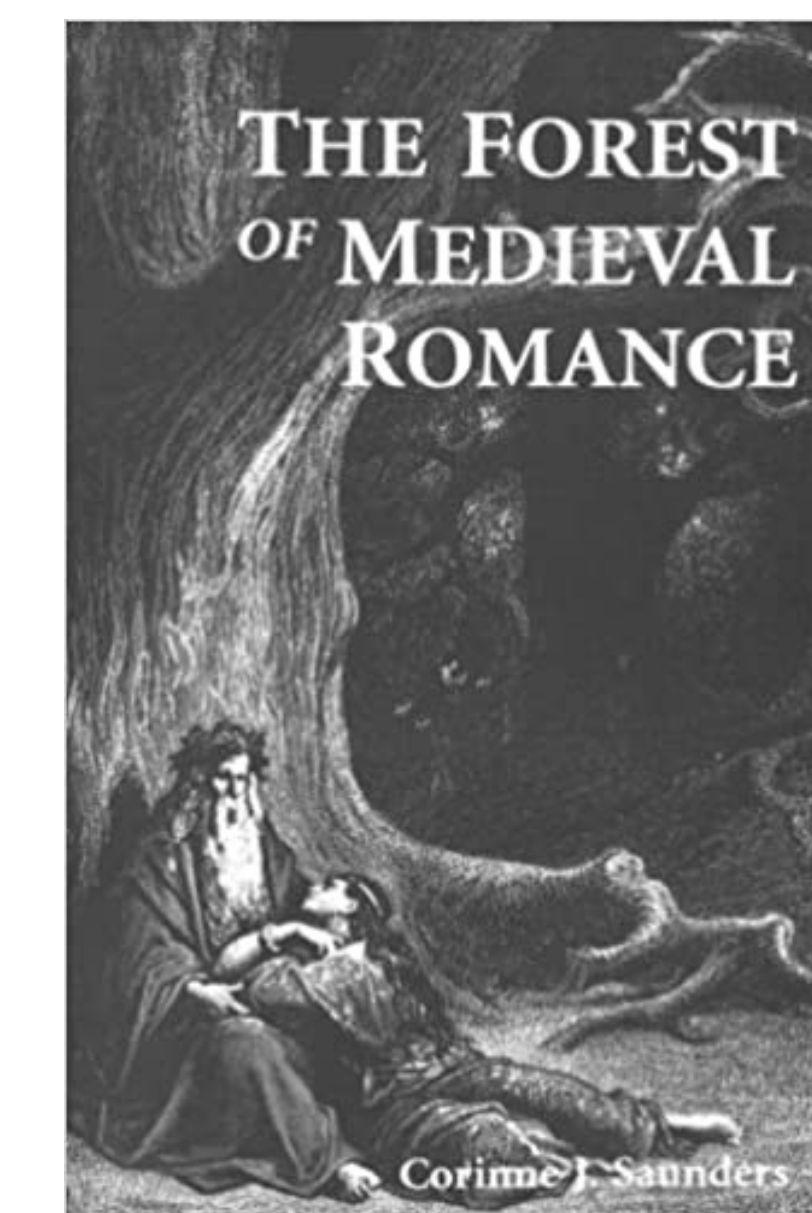### How Does the Forest of Medieval Romance Compare to the Greenwood of Medieval Outlaw Narratives?

Medieval Romance (per Corinne Saunders)	Medieval Outlaw Narratives (per Maurice Keen)
• place of mystery, fear, danger, but also of potential and adventure; forest is an unknown world where laws of court/castle do not matter	• familiar and homely place; intimate knowledge of landscape; source of food and sanctuary to outlaws; natural law or law separate but equal to law of court/castle; perpetual spring, generic and idealized location
• narrative focus is not on community, but rather on isolated knight's achievement of honour	• conflicts between outlaw individuals or (communities) and abuse of power by corrupt and repressive agents of the crown
• conflicts between social responsibility and individual passion; lines often blurred	• populated with peasants, foresters, outlaws
• common themes include rape, idyll, madness, vision, hunt, otherworld	• inhabitants begin and end in forest, occasionally leaving forest for court/castle; if pardoned by king, tale ends and outlaw returns to law and obscurity
• populated with damsels and knights, sometimes fantastical creatures	
• knights initially leave court/castle to enter forest, but always return to court/castle	

References to the Forest (or Wood) in Book 1: King Uther and King Arthur

- "Uther Pendragon and Merlin" [6 occurrences of *forest*, 3 occurrences of *wood*]
- "Balyn le Sauvage" [4 occurrences of *forest*, 1 occurrence of *wood*]
- "The Wedding of King Arthur" [2 occurrences of *forest;* 0 occurrences of *wood*]
- "The Book of Adventures" [17 occurrences of *forest*, 1 occurrences of *wood*]

What Changes does Malory Make to His Primary Source Concerning this Episode with Gawain's Banishment and Time Spent in the Forest?

Anonymous *Suite du Merlin*	Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*
• No oath required of Round Table knights	• Pentecostal Oath established (only fight in just cause, give mercy when requested, serve women)
• Arthur directly commands Yvain (Uwayne) to leave court	• Arthur orders King Uriens, Uwayne's father, to "put [Uwayne] oute of my courte" (122)
• Yvain ashamed by dismissal, requests Gawain to accompany him	• Gawain immediately declares he has been banished as well; no attempt to reframe situation or console Uwayne
• Gawain suggests Arthur will repent of decision, but that now Yvain has opportunities for adventure	
• Yvain and Gawain enter forest	• Uwayne and Gawain enter forest; subsequent adventures follow *Suite du Merlin* fairly closely
• Arthur notices Gawain's absence, fears that once Gawain gets a taste of adventure, he will never return to court	• When Arthur realizes Gawain is gone, there is great sorrow in the court, but no explicit reason for sorrow is given

THE FOREST OF MEDIEVAL ROMANCE
Corinne J. Saunders

THE OUTLAWS OF MEDIEVAL LEGEND
MAURICE KEEN

TENTATIVE CONCLUSIONS

The role of the forest in Malory is largely consistent with medieval romance conventions, although as Saunders notes, Malory's forest sometimes resembles the forest of medieval chronicles (particularly when Malory draws upon chronicles as his source material). The three episodes preceding "The Book of Adventures" emphasize meetings between characters in courtly locations as King Arthur is establishing his reign, so the significantly higher rate of textual references to *forests* in "The Book of Adventures" is not surprising as the focus moves away from what is happening politically within Arthur's court to highlighting the quests of individual knights.

Malory's changes to Gawain's departure in Book 1: "The Book of Adventures" have received little notice from scholars. For example, Ralph Norris merely notes of Gawain's departure that it [displays] the family loyalty" that Robert H. Wilson argues is characteristic of Gawain throughout the Arthurian legend (Norris 40).

I argue that Malory's scene is reminiscent of the forest in medieval outlaw narratives. The Robin Hood tradition has already been invoked in the first episode of Book 1, "Uther Pendragon and Merlin", when Merlin appears in Sherwood Forest, one of Robin Hood's archetypal haunts, in the guide of the medieval outlaw and trickster:

> "So aftir this Merlion departed frome his mayster and com to Kynge Arthure, that was in the Castell of Bedgrayne, that was one of the castels that stondith in the Foreyste of Sherewode. And Merlion was so disgysed that Kynge Arthure knew hym nat, for he was all befurred in black shepis skynnes, and a grete payre of bootis, and a boowe and arowis, in a russet gowne, and brought wylde gyese in hys honde" (31.1-7).

This passage seems to be Malory's invention, and again, few scholars comment on it: Greene describes Merlin as a "churl" (58), and Hoffman merely comments that this is Merlin's "most elaborate disguise" (20).

If we read this moment through the lens of medieval outlaw narratives, the forest becomes for Gawain "an asylum from the tyranny of evil lords and a corrupt law" (Keen 2); the next step will be to examine more closely Arthur's behavior as king.

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