

ARTICLE

Ecocritical readings of medieval German and Latin heroic poetry

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Abstract

While the living conditions of the Anthropocene pose dangerous consequences for humanity, they have also heightened our attention and sensitivity to nature, that is, our natural environment, even when looking back into the past. Scientists and literary scholars have discovered that ecocriticism strongly contributes to a deeper, refined insight into the interaction between human actors and natural agents. Many medievalists have thus begun to focus on how pre-modern poets reflected on water, the forest, mountains, animals, and plants as they impacted human life. This paper reviews a range of medieval heroic epics where specific aspects of nature matter extensively in shaping the protagonists' characters, experiences, and struggles. Activities, such as crossing a body of water, traveling through forests, climbing mountains, staying in caves, landing and fighting on islands, or living in wilderness areas assume critical functions in narrative development. Although the ecological concerns in these medieval texts may differ from those found in post-modern literature, close readings of major representatives of this genre indicate that medieval poets already demonstrated significant awareness of the close connections between humans and their natural environment.

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1. Introduction

As is well-known, the Old English *Beowulf* (ca. 750) is significantly determined by the protagonist's encounters with the natural environment, particularly his willingness to accept the challenges of bodies of water. First, he crosses the Baltic Sea to travel from Sweden to Denmark; then, at Hrothgar's court, his heroic accomplishments during his youth are questioned by one of the king's retainers, Unferth. He rejects this slander by insisting on his major triumph in the wild sea, gaining victory not only over the wild creatures in the deep water but also over his competitor, Brecca. In the course of the two battles, first against Grendel and then against Grendel's mother, the poet outlines, in impressive detail, the natural conditions of the territory where those monstrous creatures exist, including their fins and the body of water. Yet *Beowulf* is never intimidated by these natural obstacles and demonstrates his dominance over those elements and those uncanny creatures. Finally, having accomplished all his goals, he returns home, crossing the sea once again, which transforms that body of water into a symbol of *Beowulf*'s heroism, life journey, and existential medium.

Even 50 years later, when he faces the fire-spewing dragon in its cave, the mighty protagonist does not shrink back from the danger and faces it head-on. We know the outcome, the death of both opponents, and the survival of Beowulf's retainer, Wiglaf, who reprimands all the other men for their cowardice and neglect of their oath of loyalty. After the dead dragon has been pushed over the cliff into the sea, never to be seen again because "the flood embrace[d] the keeper of those splendors."^{1(p293)} Once the enemy has been eliminated, the funeral process is carried out. Specifically, Beowulf's corpse is turned over to the flames: "wood-smoke ascended swart over the blaze, roaring flames interwoven with weeping – the wind currents subsided – until it had broken down the bone-house hot in its very heart."^{1(p293)} The poet placed two of the four fundamental elements in the central position, and the other two, air and soil, complement the funeral.² The great hero's life has thus come to an end, a man who represented and fought for humankind as its savior, and a person who was not daunted by natural forces.³ However, despite all his physical strength and leadership qualities, Beowulf ultimately failed because he overestimated his abilities as a single warrior and did not ask any of his retainers for help. This failure finds its vivid expression in the hero's ardent desire to see parts of the golden treasure from the dragon's hoard just before his death: "Make no delay now, so that I may perceive the wealth of the ancients, golden objects, see plainly the brilliant jewelry, so that in view of those costly things I will be able to give up more gently my life and my nation, which I have held for long."^{3(p267)}

If we accept these critical aspects in this early medieval heroic epic poem, it becomes abundantly clear that both this work and most likely most other literary works in this genre need to be analyzed while keeping the ecocritical perspective in mind. Human actions never take place in a vacuum, though it often remains unclear to what extent natural conditions contribute to, interact with, inhibit, or hamper the hero, or influence his mindset. The hypothesis for this paper consists of the argument that paying close attention to the natural framework within which human actions take place helps to uncover deeper levels of meaning conveyed by the respective narrative. Considering, for instance, how easily Beowulf could handle the challenges of water, either in the swimming contest or in crossing the sea between Sweden and Denmark, not to mention his dive into the water following Grendel's mother to her lair, where he manages to kill her and to decapitate the dead Grendel, we can certainly conclude that this natural element had an enormous impact on this hero or allowed him to accomplish his heroic deeds. Not surprisingly, when he later faces the dragon and its fiery breath, he can, with the help of Wiglaf, defeat the monster, but he, as a man so

intimately associated with water, has to give up his life as well. The burning of his dead body thus fittingly concludes this monumental episode.⁴

2. Ecocriticism in medieval literature

Nature is, according to the anonymous poet, not a passive reality; instead, it engages with the hero and assumes a certain degree of agency. Already in 1997, Otto Kinne⁵ – and he was not even the first – had urged us to include the natural environment as one of the key components of all ethical reflections because human society exists within and is dependent on nature.⁶ Recent anthropologists have occasionally charged Western literature with viewing nature as only a passive and irrelevant agent, while the opposite can be observed in Australian Aboriginal literature, for instance.⁷ This is a dangerous approach to literature because it unnecessarily idealizes certain ethnic groups as being more in tune with nature than others, who are normally associated with the Western, previously only European culture. However, when we turn to medieval heroic poetry, we can actually realize that it allows us to recognize a strong correlation between the hero's actions and the natural setting, which assumes, at least indirectly, an active role in the protagonist's life and gains the character of an agent. At issue here is not the question regarding ethics and nature,⁸ but regarding the human interactions with and observation of nature within the literary discourse, such as the Middle High German heroic epic poems.

Many post-modern theoreticians have already projected the alternative to human existence here on Earth by migrating to other planets or similar stellar objects, where enough water and oxygen might provide the necessary conditions to survive.⁹ In contrast to such a sci-fi pipedream, the real task we all face is to work hard with our material existence as it is and to protect it so that humanity can survive in the future. This implies concretely that we develop a strong sensitivity to nature as a sort of partner we have to look out for. This specifically entails a learning process taking us in many different directions, including science and medicine, as well as literature and philosophy. To learn once again the necessary respect for and love of nature as the bedrock of our livelihood, ecocritical perspectives toward medieval narratives promise to serve as critically important catalysts to achieve that goal in at least some respects.¹⁰ We could easily take into view the personal relationships between animals and people, or the impact of weather on the protagonists in a specific narrative. However, for a concise approach, here the focus will rest on the interactions of the heroes with their natural environment, which, at closer analysis, contributes in many different ways to their characters, their strengths, and even their knowledge of the future.

While the function of the natural environment has already been discussed by various scholars focusing primarily on modern literature,¹¹ here I address how a variety of Middle High German poets (and one writing in Latin) perceived nature within their heroic epic poems and how they qualified it as an agent directly interacting with the protagonist.¹² Curiously, the oldest representative, the balladic *Hildebrandslied* (ca. 820), excludes all references to the natural world and examines only the verbal exchanges between the old warrior Hildebrand and the young opponent, Hadubrand, who is, as it later turns out, his son but believes that his father died a long time ago in a battle. Next, even though the poet Priest Conrad created a German version of the Old French *Chanson de Roland* (ca. 1150) with his *Rolandslied* (ca. 1180), certainly closely related to the genre of the heroic epic poem, we would have to leave this aside in our discussion because the heroic elements are overshadowed by numerous other aspects correlated related to the role of Emperor Charlemagne and extensive military clashes with the Muslim forces. Nevertheless, in future studies, it would be productive to investigate more closely to what extent natural elements matter here as well because the final battle between the Christians and their opponents takes place in the famous Valle Roncesvalles in the Pyrenees. We would have to reflect further on the function of the mountain setting and the specific role of the valley where the fighting erupts. Otherwise, the ecocritical lens has already proven to be highly effective in uncovering new levels of meaning in medieval literature at large, but heroic poetry has not yet been subjected to this specific interpretation. Both water as such and the forest/trees in the Middle Ages have already been recognized as significant aspects with a great impact on human life, maybe not quite yet with a concern about destruction, loss, pollution, and elimination caused by people's actions. However, as we know by now, natural settings are regularly described as deeply influential for a person's growth, conditions, and potential, such as in the case of young Parzival in Wolfram von Eschenbach's eponymous Grail romance (ca. 1205).¹³

Humanity has never lived in splendid isolation separated from the natural environment, and much of our imagination, cultural concepts, economic conditions, and common operations are predicated on how natural elements interact with us, how we perceive them, and what they do to us in countless ways.¹⁴ Of course, we cannot expect an explicitly ecocritical commentary in pre-modern literature, but there are many opportunities to identify human awareness of, fear about, interest in, or curiosity about the natural elements. Without going into details here, the 10th-century Latin epic poem *Waltharius* demonstrates in the clearest terms the enormous importance of the natural

environment for the protagonist, particularly during his escape from the Huns, who had kept him as their hostage. The protagonist and his fiancée hide in the forest during the day and travel at night: "They flee the villages and leave behind the beautiful fields, following their winding, curved path through uncut mountains, they turn their nervous steps this way and that through the pathless wild."^{14(p69)} Moreover, uncivilized nature continues to protect them later once they have crossed the river Rhine and reached a seemingly safe point in a cave. There, Waltharius sets up his valiant and powerful defense against King Gunther and his men while standing at the entrance to a cave in the Vosges Mountains, and later, when he and his bride are ambushed by Gunther and his liege man Hagen.¹⁵

Almost throughout the entire poem, nature emerges as an essential component, sometimes supporting the protagonist to hide in the forest during the day, sometimes betraying him to King Gunther when his payment for the ferry across the Rhine by means of fish reveals to the latter that a foreigner has traveled through his land. However, the cave in the mountains ultimately makes it possible for Waltharius to defend himself effectively and with brutal force against all those warriors whom Gunther has sent toward him to belittle and to punish him. The poet did not give nature an independent voice, but it is unmistakable how much it contributes to the protagonist's ultimate success and triumph over King Etzel/Attila and later over King Gunther.

3. *Nibelungenlied*

Many of the elements in *Waltharius* can then also be discovered in the Middle High German epic *Nibelungenlied* (ca. 1200), yet their nature reveals an uncanny degree of underworldly powers. Although this masterpiece of medieval German literature has already been the object of intensive investigations, ecocritical approaches are still a rarity.¹⁶ However, a careful analysis can uncover many significant features in this poem that demonstrate the close correlation between the protagonists and the natural environment.¹⁷ In fact, much of the narrative development appears to be predicated on the role assumed by natural elements, entities, or forces, and the protagonists' reactions to them confirm the instrumental function in the entire plot development.

Siegfried has gained much of his supernatural power by way of killing a dragon, bathing in its blood, thus gaining an impenetrable skin, and by defeating the king of the dwarfs, Alberich. With the latter's cloak of invisibility, he acquired the additional strength of 12 men. The realm of the dwarfs is underground, in the mountain, so Siegfried's victory constitutes his connection with that world, and

he returns there once when he needs extra forces after his secret victory over the Icelandic Queen Brunhild on behalf of the Burgundian King Gunther. At the same time, the entire episode indicates that Siegfried here operates somewhat in parallel with Beowulf, crossing at miraculous speed the open body of water from the city of Worms on the Rhine to Iceland far north in the Atlantic.

There, however, he pretends to be Gunther's vassal to deceive the queen, putting on the mysterious cloak and accomplishing the three competitions against Brunhild, which forces her to accept Gunther as her future husband. When she subsequently seems to resist and calls together all her people, Siegfried returns to the underworld and calls up the mighty Nibelung warrior, who settles the case in favor of the Burgundian king. Then, Brunhild is forced to travel with the company back to Worms, where more dramatic events await. All this confirms, however, that Siegfried is the master both of the mountainous territory deep below the surface and of the waterways that he apparently knows well and can traverse with ease. This is confirmed when Gunther deliberates with him and Hagen on how he should carry out the bridal quest. With just a little coaxing, Siegfried assures him: "I can guide you safely from here on the water, rest assured. I know all these waterways."¹⁷(stanza 378, p33)

Without going into further details, we can conclude that Siegfried is intimately associated with primordial forces in nature, which he subsequently demonstrates also when he goes hunting and kills not only so many animals that the other warriors beg him to keep some of them for themselves, but he also catches a bear alive, ties it up, and transports it to their camp. There, he releases the poor animal, which, very confused and terrified, races throughout the tents, scares everyone to death, and tries to get away until Siegfried catches up with it and kills it triumphantly, thus demonstrating his complete mastery over the wild animals and the forest. However, this then sets the stage for Hagen's assassination attempt, which significantly takes place at a well where the unsuspecting victim bends down to drink water, providing the ideal opportunity for Hagen to hurl the lance into his one vulnerable spot on the shoulder blade and thus to kill him.

Throughout the Middle Ages and far beyond, water in a well has continuously carried deep symbolic meaning, whether we think of the legend of Gongolf (Hrotsvit of Gandersheim), the Arthurian romance of *Yvain/Iwein* (Chrétien de Troyes, Hartmann von Aue), the mythical accounts of Melusine, biblical narratives, or fairy tales.¹⁸ The same applies to this famous scene in *Nibelungenlied*, which is then extended to the court where the hero's corpse is transported to and then placed on a bier. Although blood is

not the same as water from a well, it is, as a liquid, supposed to speak the truth, and when Hagen walks by the corpse, it starts bleeding again, which reveals Hagen's culpability as the murderer, as many scholars have already pointed out. Tragically, of course, the clear and potable water of the well in the forest has transformed into the blood that is oozing out of Siegfried's body. Ponderously, at the very end of the epic poem, when most of the Burgundians have already been killed and they are badly parched and face a fire, they turn to the blood of their fallen compatriots and drink that upon Hagen's recommendation, certainly a grotesque travesty of the crystal-clear water emanating from the well serving excellently to quench the hero's thirst.¹⁹

Most tellingly, when the Burgundians travel to the land of the Huns upon Kriemhild's invitation, they also have to cross the Danube, which proves to be a major challenge since there is neither a bridge nor a ferryboat. Indeed, the river constitutes a critical barrier that no one knows how to cross at first: "the river was too wide at that point. Many of the brave knights dismounted there."¹⁹(stanza 1527, p126) Hagen searches for options and comes across a pond where three water nixies swim. By removing their clothing, he forces them to prophesy their future. The first one lies to him outright and projects a glorious outcome. However, once he has returned their garments, the second one reveals the truth to him that they will all die, except their chaplain, which later turns out to be correct. Hagen then searches for a ferryman downstream, but he gets into a conflict with him and slays him, as he always tends to do with any opponent. However, to his chagrin, when he subsequently tries to drown the chaplain as a test of the veracity of the nixies' prophecy, this does not work, and the poor cleric manages to swim to the shore. Thus, the mighty steward knows that they are doomed, so he destroys their boat, the meaning of which remains unclear to all the others, although Hagen reveals the true reason to his brother Dankwart, but the latter does not respond or comment on this horrible news.¹⁹(stanzas 1581-1582)

The rest is then history, so to speak, with all their doom waiting for them at King Etzel's court. The poet limits himself to describing the subsequent events, especially at Rüdiger's court, and then in the land of the Huns. The poem focuses almost exclusively on the exchanges between the various major figures until the fighting breaks out, which then turns into a veritable Armageddon. Nature, however, does not play any significant role in all that, whereas the setting at the court, the various chambers and halls, assumes the central background for the fierce fighting and killing. In a way, we could argue that the horrible development leading to all their deaths also has something to do with their turning away from the protective framework of nature (forest, the ocean, the river, and the pond) toward

the exclusively human construction, where unfettered emotions clash with each other. As our next example will illustrate, however, that tragedy and its transformation into human happiness can also be associated with natural elements.

4. Kudrun

About 60 years later, an anonymous poet created a remarkable heroic poem divided into three parts in which the theme of the bridal quest assumes central importance. *Kudrun* (ca. 1260) has recently attracted considerably more attention, especially because in the third section, the female protagonist, granddaughter of the first major hero, Hagen, refuses to submit to the model of kidnapping princesses and forcing them to marry the victorious kidnapper, a bold and powerful prince from far away who can resist the attempt of the maid's father to retrieve his daughter.²⁰

There are some intriguing reasons to speculate that a female poet might have composed this poem because, at the end, Queen Hilde rules after her husband Hetel's death in the battle against Hartmut of Ormanie, who had kidnapped Kudrun. An even more important reason is that Kudrun eventually intervenes and brings to a stop all the fighting between, on the one hand, her brother Ortwin and her original fiancé, Herwig, and, on the other hand, Hartmut and his family. She faces severe difficulties in this effort to re-establish peace because the warriors on her side are so fanatical in getting their revenge, but ultimately, Kudrun can calm warriors, such as the hoary Wate and also her recalcitrant mother, Hilde, substituting all military conflicts with diplomatic relations and marriages to avoid future fighting.²¹

The poet is deeply intrigued by spatial concepts and has the various protagonists operate in many different locations far away from home. This move from one place to another, either by force or voluntarily, emerges as a constant pattern throughout the entire text, which closely associates the various figures with the changing natural settings. Beginning with Hagen, the first hero in the grandfather generation, we learn about the young child being abducted by a griffin who takes him to a distant island, where three foreign princesses await their destiny. However, Hagen is strong enough to fight against the griffin and to kill it, and thus liberate the three women, one of whom he later marries, Hilde.

The status of the island deserves further attention, but first, we can recognize the parallel to the other bridal quest when Hartmut has abducted Kudrun and finds himself in a severe fight against her father on the island of Wülpensand. Details do not need to be examined here, whereas we only pay attention to the significant geophysical distance

to the warrior's home. We can observe a meaningful arc between the island where the grandfather (Hagen) had been abducted to by the griffin in his youth and the island where Kudrun's father is slain by her kidnapper, with the traditional bridal quest having gone to an extreme with no foreseeable constructive solution, as in all previous cases. The island thus emerges as a curiously isolated space where human destinies are determined, as we also know from Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan* (ca. 1210), where the young protagonist kills his opponent, the Irish knight Morold, after the latter has badly wounded him with his sword covered with a terrible poison.²² Following Homi K. Bhabha, or rather adapting his concept for this medieval topos, we could call this a "third space" where the narrative takes a surprising turn and forces people to reflect deeply on their destiny.²³ On the island, traditionally, social and cultural norms are lifted, which gives raw forces of nature or people free rein. Thus, Kudrun's family is mostly decimated there, and she is forced to accompany her kidnapper to his kingdom.

However, due to the role of water in her life in captivity, the female protagonist preserves her strength to resist all attempts by Hartmut and his parents to crush her will and determination. She and her maids are forced to wash clothing in the icy cold water of the sea, and that is where they are discovered by her liberators many years later.²⁴ The entire epic poem is determined by the world of the open sea, with the various heroes regularly traveling by ship from one kingdom to another, often suffering from dangerous winds or at one point, the magnetic mountain. However, the worst is reserved for Kudrun, who is ordered by Hartmut's mother, Gerlint: "You will carry my clothes down to the beach every day, and you will wash them for me and my household, and you will take care that no one ever finds you idle."²⁴(stanza 1053, p.101) Their suffering is great because of the inclement weather and hard labor, as we hear more about just when Kudrun's liberators arrive and begin talking to them: "They shivered on account of the cold, those poor servants. They were shabbily dressed, and the cold winds of March were blowing."²⁴(stanza 1216, p.115) However, at that point, hope returns to them, which is also indicated by the change of the weather: "It was the season when winter retreats, and the birds compete in wanting to sing their songs again after the days of March."²⁴(stanza 1218, p.115) Yet, snow is still on the ground, the water is partly covered by ice, the wind blows mercilessly, which strongly contrasts with the imminent change of events, since Kudrun's warriors have arrived.

Beyond this scene, no further comments regarding the natural environment emerge because the narrator is, from then on, focused only on the battle to free the

princess and then on Kudrun's intense efforts to establish peace by means of marriages. Nevertheless, nature played a significant role throughout the epic, highlighting each time when a major change in the events was to happen. In contrast to the *Nibelungenlied*, which ends in an absolute fiasco, Kudrun and her maids are freed, they can return home, and good diplomatic relations are established, which makes it unnecessary for the poet to reflect any further on the natural framework. We hear about another kidnapped maid in a late medieval or early modern heroic ballad, but she is then kept as a prisoner on top of the mountains.

5. A late medieval heroic poem: *Das Lied vom Hürnen Seyfrid*

Many Middle High German poets were deeply engaged with the genre of heroic epic poems, which are mostly located in the Alpine regions and present the adventures of mighty characters, especially Dietrich of Bern. They consistently stand out within their society due to their physical might and fearless engagement with monstrous creatures, mostly dragons.²⁵ In the course of time, many of the motifs merged and formed a narrative repertoire from which new poets could easily draw, as is also the case with the late medieval balladic poem, *Das Lied vom Hürnen Seyfrid* (*The Song of Seyfried with Skin Hard as Horn*), copies of which are preserved only in early modern prints, which makes accurate dating virtually impossible.²⁶ Basically, it tells the story of Siegfried liberating a princess whom a dragon had abducted and held at a remote location in the mountains. To add to the mystery of the story, that dragon is actually a human transformed into this monstrous shape who waits for the long-awaited moment to regain his original figure and thus to marry Kriemhild.

My only concern here, however, focuses on what the poet has to say about nature and its impact on the protagonist, just as in the previous cases. However, we also face a serious interpretive challenge because this poem consists of many diverse pieces that are loosely stitched together and often seem to contradict each other. In other cases, they pick up an issue that was addressed already before, all depending on the print version we might consult. The end result of a fairly intensive printing process can thus be identified as a literary bricolage that does not lend itself well to a consistent reading of the text.

As we have noticed numerous times when the narrator of a heroic epic poem engages with battles or courtly ceremonies, nature disappears completely from sight; however, as soon as the narrative takes another turn, its significance reappears and begs for attention. This is also the case in this balladic version of a heroic poem, where a number of innovative scenes enter the picture (HS refers to

the print used there). The young hero is overly boisterous and dangerously powerful, so the family, following the councilors' advice, sends him off into the world, and Seyfried soon reaches a village at the edge of the forest where he takes up employment with a blacksmith.^{26(stanza 4)} However, even there, he is too forceful and destroys the anvil through his mighty strikes with the hammer, which severely irritates his master and the other servants. To get rid of him, the former sends him off to a charcoal burner to fetch more coal, but in reality, he expects him to run into a dragon who would surely kill him.^{26(stanza 6)} Significantly, that dragon is placed behind a lime tree ("Linde"), the symbolic tree of love since antiquity (Ovid) and recognized as such by many medieval court poets (Walther von der Vogelweide). However, here the dragon is only monstrous, and yet the hero can slay it,^{26(stanza 7)} upon which he enters more deeply into the forest, where he encounters a whole nest of dragon-like creatures. Without any concerns, he throws whole trees on them, fetches charcoal, dumps that on them all, and can thus burn them to death.

In an odd retrieval from the *Nibelungenlied*, strange liquid oozes from the site, and when Siegfried has dipped his finger into it, his skin becomes covered with a horn. He realizes that this would be a tremendous protective layer on his body, so he covers himself completely except at the shoulder blade, which the narrator identifies as the very spot where he would later be killed.^{26(stanzas 16, pp7,8)} Further adapting the older source, we are also told how Seyfried conquered the hoard from the dwarfs,^{26(stanzas 14,15)} but details are scarce. We are only told that many warriors later lost their lives there, except Dietrich von Bern and Master Hildebrand,^{26(stanza 15, pp7,8)} which proves to be yet another loan from a different narrative strand.

In HS II, the poet basically relied on the initial scene in *Kudrun*, as the dragon kidnaps the young princess, Kriemhild, but, as it then turns out, behind the horrible monster mask there is a young prince who will shed this outer body within five years to take possession of her,^{26(stanzas 37 and 41)} although he then also threatens her that they both will end up in hell. Only then does the narrator turn to Seyfrid, who, as a mighty young hero, comes across the site where the dragon rests, but first he has to find his way through the wilderness, which eventually makes him feel despondent, no longer having any orientation.^{26(stanzas 50)} A dwarf then grudgingly helps him understand his family background and the situation with the unfortunate maid,^{26(stanza 50)} alerting him to the necessity for him to fight first against a giant to gain the keys for the gates to the dragon's lair.^{26(stanza 59)} However, as another dwarf then informs him, without the giant he cannot gain the keys.

Whereas Waltharius utilized the cave to protect himself, Seyfried must enter the depth of the cave to move toward the dragon's lair,^{26(stanza 49)} and at that moment, the giant comes forward and grants him a magical sword, the only one with which the monster can be killed.^{26(stanza 107)} However, immediately afterward, he betrays him a third time, which results in a mighty wrestling match, which Seyfried can win for himself. Although the giant begs for his life, he is then thrown down the cliffs and is smashed to pieces.^{26(stanza 114)} The maid would have thrown herself off the rock to commit suicide if her hero had not gained the victory, certainly another significant component highlighting the extreme drama of this scene,^{26(stanza 110)} but Krimhilt finds this outcome to be comical and laughs about it, which seems rather curious and almost inappropriate.

Before the fight against the dragon begins, the hero needs refreshment since he has not eaten or drunk anything for four days. The dwarf Eugel brings him all he needs, but then the dragon arrives, spewing fire from its snout, which makes the rocks melt like glass, causing complete havoc: "*Das, seyð die welt was gestanden,/Der stein so was zerruet*" (so that, since the creation of the world, the rocks had never before been damaged more than in that moment).^{26(stanza 129, pp7,8)} All the dwarfs who had assisted the hero or who had stayed in the mountain underneath the dragon's rocks flee, and two guardians of their treasure move it out and hide it in another cave. However, the dragon knows the passage to that other cave too well since he tends to rest there to cool down. The maid and the hero hide in that lower part of the mountain and wait until the heat has somewhat abated. Then Seyfried boldly faces the dragon again, although he has to suffer more than ever in his life and would have died. In fact, the dragon is so powerful that he is about to toss the opponent off the cliffs to his death with the help of its tail, but the hero jumps up in time and attacks the dragon, so he overcomes, in a way, the very danger that the Old English hero Beowulf had to face and in which he then died. The heat then increases so much that the dragon's skin made out of horn begins to melt, which finally provides Seyfried the opportunity to strike the monster and kill it. He simply tosses the corpse down into the abyss, and this is the end of the battle.^{26(stanza 148)}

The poem is then wrapped up fairly quickly; the two survivors recover, though with difficulties, the king of the dwarfs, Eugel, explains how they all had been subjugated by the giant, and out of gratitude, he and his people submit themselves under Seyfried to serve him. As Eugel explains, if the giant had not been killed, he would have turned against them all and avenged their move to reveal the secret of how to reach the dragon's rock through a portal in the cave. Moreover, based on his astrological expertise, he predicts the protagonist's future, that is, his murder, and

that his wife would avenge him in a terrifying manner, leading to the death of all warriors.^{26(stanza 162)} We also learn more about the treasure that Seyfried fetches from the mountain cave and subsequently pours into the water of the Rhine.^{26(stanza 167)} In the final stanzas, we are briefly told about the hatred and envy that Hagen and the other kings feel about Seyfried because he holds a much higher rank than they all, and thus about his assassination.

It proves to be rather difficult to follow the various events in this hybrid poem, where many diverse narrative elements are combined, drawing from the *Nibelungenlied* and other epic poems. The focus, however, rests on Seyfried's battle against the dragon, the central role of the mountain and the underground, the cave, the treasonous giant, and the dwarfs. The poet presents a highly complex system of tunnels, gates, and halls underneath the top of the mountain, where the dragon rules. We do not learn who might have created the gates, or the lock, and hence the keys, but the entire setting indicates a mix of natural settings and human-made contraptions. The dwarfs mirror human society below the mountain, whereas the dragon represents the monstrous forces. The rocks even assume a significant role because they begin to shake and become so hot that a melting process sets in. It is not clear how Seyfried even manages to survive this horrible fire, but in that heat, even the dragon's skin made out of horn melts, making it vulnerable.

Altogether, the poet presents a narrative bricolage with many different elements borrowed from the rich tradition of Middle High German heroic epic poems and maybe even the Latin epic, *Waltharius*. The standard features of this genre are all present, including the dragon, the skin covered with horn, the abduction of the princess, the appearance of the dwarfs, the giant, and the protagonist's superior courage, power, and resolve, which ultimately lead to his triumph over the giant and the dragon. It almost amounts to an irony that this glorious hero, once having returned to human society, faces petty envy and slander, and thus becomes the victim of murder.

This, then, finally allows us to reflect on the role of the mountain, or the rocks and the tunnels, because they all prove to be critically important in Seyfried's efforts to overcome the giant and then the dragon. In contrast to many other narratives involving a dragon in a mountainous region, here we are presented with a sophisticated internal structure, with chambers, gates, passageways, a huge underground world where the dwarfs reside, the residence of the giant, hiding places for the treasure, and then the pathway to the surface where the dragon keeps the kidnapped princes and where the final battle with Seyfried takes place. Whereas in *Beowulf* the dragon lives in its cave

along with the treasure, here the action is mostly focused on the mountain top, almost a tableau from where the victor can simply throw down the dead body of the dragon.

We never learn who created the interior structure, the gates, the locks, and other parts of the space inside the mountain. However, it is very clear that without the key to the gates or door, there is no way for Seyfrid to reach the top. Referring to the giant, for instance, the dwarf Eugel points out: “*Derselbig hat den schluessel,/Dauon der steyn auff gat*” (He holds the key with which the rocks will open up).^{26(stanza 59, pp5,6)} The mountain thus proves to be a complex structure, not simply an immovable object in nature. Poor Krimhild is not only the dragon’s prisoner, but she is kept high up on the plateau, as we may assume, which is inaccessible even to the protagonist. In fact, this adds even more weight to the ecocritical perspective: Seyfrid would not be able to achieve anything in that situation without the dwarf’s information about the key, without the malicious and treacherous giant, and without the thousands of dwarfs assisting him to some extent. As powerful as Seyfrid appears to be, he has to engage with the mountain and its inhabitants, and yet even he would almost have died in the fire spewed forth by the dragon if he had not been able to hide for some time in the cave. In other words, the mountain itself emerges as his protector.

6. Conclusion

Apart from the *Hildebrandslied*, where nature does not matter in any notable fashion, Middle High German heroic poetry has proven to be strongly determined by the role played by nature. The poets do not assign it a specific role as a personal agent, but its presence is deeply felt and elaborated in many different fashions. It would hence be necessary to proceed further and examine the way other poets of heroic poems engaged with this aspect, such as in the *Rabenschlacht*, *Laurin*, *Dietrichs Flucht*, *Alpharts Tod*, or *Dietrich und Wenezlan*. However, it is often rather difficult to gain a better understanding of the role of nature there because the poets were so pre-occupied with the discussion of individual fights and entire battles. Nevertheless, as our small selection has already demonstrated, a careful reading of the background comments can reveal much information about the poet’s attitude toward the natural environment, sensitivity regarding natural elements, awareness of natural symbolism, and at times even the secret agency of natural objects impacting the protagonist’s life.

As we have observed regarding *Beowulf*, the crossing of natural spaces, especially the open water, consistently represents a major transition in the protagonist’s life. This also applies to *Walthariuslied*, then to the *Nibelungenlied*, *Kudrun*, and, to some extent, the ballad of the *Hürnen*

Seyfried. In the last text, however, there is no situation with water; the hero instead has to travel through a wild forest and reach the remote mountain where the dragon holds Krimhild captive. That is also the same situation in *Kudrun*, where a griffin abducts young Hagen in the first stage of the narrative, who subsequently kills the monster and thus can liberate and rescue the three princesses.

Depending on the circumstances, there are forests, mountains, caves, rivers, ponds, and islands, and each time the hero has to adapt to a new environmental setting and respond to it. We would go too far by equating all these aspects with a post-modern sensitivity regarding and even empathy with nature. However, we can affirm without doubt that all these poets of heroic epics, either in Old English, Medieval Latin, or Middle High German, demonstrated considerable attention to nature and presented their protagonists in close interaction with it, as a protective space (e.g., forest and cave), as a location of physical challenge (e.g., river and sea), as a site where prophecies are promulgated, or as the location of murder and disorientation. The late medieval heroic epics tend to be situated in the Alpine regions, where they encounter the kingdom of dwarfs, giants, and also dragons/griffins.

Contrary to modern assumptions, neither the large bodies of water nor the daunting mountains represent simply fearful regions; instead, they emerge as major challenges and thus allow the heroes to demonstrate their power, determination, and values. Whenever a river or sea has to be crossed, the hero is the first to figure out a way or knows how to handle the situation, either because he knows from the past how to travel that route, or because he is knowledgeable enough to adapt to the danger, succeeding triumphantly over nature, but only until he is engulfed and killed by societal conflicts. In short, heroic epic poems demonstrate a strong awareness of the natural environment and utilize it consistently to profile their main characters more specifically. The natural forces are daunting, but the major figures demonstrate that they have enough power and wit to handle them to some extent. However, much depends on the circumstances because in the *Nibelungenlied*, for instance, Hagen’s struggle against the power of the river signals, at least indirectly, that they are all doomed to die in battle. In *Waltharius*, however, nature provides protection for the protagonist. In *Kudrun*, catastrophic events take place on an island and at the shore of the sea. Finally, in *Hürne Seyfried*, the hero faces not only the dragon, but also the mountain itself with its caves, passages, gates, and hallways. Only once he has figured out that maze does he also achieve his victory over the dragon.

Without those dangers in nature, human figures would pale in their actions, especially because nature tends to

assume, at least within the narrative framework, a certain degree of agency that influences the major events. In fact, their heroic character is mirrored and amplified through the natural elements, whether they present challenges, opportunities, cover and protection, or dangers and direct threats.

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