

## REWILDING WITH THE *CRI* IN MEDIEVAL FRENCH TEXTS: *YVAIN* AND *MÉLUSINE*

LIAM LEWIS

UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL, LIVERPOOL, UNITED KINGDOM

UNIVERSITY OF NOTTINGHAM, NOTTINGHAM, UNITED KINGDOM

[liam.lewis1@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:liam.lewis1@nottingham.ac.uk)

Mesire Yvains pensis chemine  
Tant qu'il vint en une gaudine;  
Et lors oï en mi le gaut  
Un cri mout dolereus et haut,  
Si s'adrecha leus vers le cri  
Chele part ou il l'ot oï.

— Chrétien de Troyes, *Yvain*<sup>1</sup>

[Sir Yvain walked pensively until he came to a forest, and there he heard, amongst the foliage, a loud and anguished *cri*. He immediately went over to where he had heard the *cri*.]

In the late-twelfth-century Arthurian romance *Le Chevalier au Lion* or *Yvain* by Chrétien de Troyes, the *cri* is a sonic marker that identifies the intense emotion of a mysterious nonhuman animal. It simultaneously acts as a metaphor for the difficulty of depicting emotion in writing, as well as instigating the rewilding of the eponymous protagonist's identity. The text features the *cri* at crucial episodes, and it establishes sound broadly conceived early in the romance as an underscore for narrative change. The plot follows Yvain, a knight at King Arthur's court, who finds himself miraculously accompanied on his own chivalric quest by a lion. Yvain first discovers the lion by responding to a sound he hears in the forest — a *cri* — only to find the lion under attack from a fire-breathing serpent and in need of saving. The lion subsequently follows Yvain on his quest to the effect that they establish a burgeoning joint reputation as 'li chevaliers au leon' [the knight with the lion, *Yvain*, l. 4285]. The *cri*, used twice in the epigraph above, is a versatile word in Old French. The sounds it signifies are often connected to high emotion and narrative transformation, resonating with the expression of sound as something ambiguous, something wild perhaps, that must be received and interpreted

---

<sup>1</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Chevalier au Lion (Yvain)*, ed. by David F. Hult, in *Chrétien de Troyes: Romans*, ed. by David F. Hult and others (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1994), pp. 705–936 (ll. 3341–46). Translations of *Yvain* from Old French to modern English are my own, based on Hult.

by characters and audiences. It often encapsulates a type of embodied emotion shared with nonhuman agents and suggests a way of reading nonhuman identities and environments as carefully managed series of symbols and ambiguous invitations to encounter. Yvain responds to the *cri* and enters into a mutually productive partnership with his companion lion as the text offers a glimpse of what rewilding in a medieval narrative might look like.

To read a medieval text through the lens of rewilding may seem like anachronism, but the term is a plastic one encapsulating the asocial and ahistorical nature of making something wild again.<sup>2</sup> Rewilding projects, based usually on landscape reform and abandonment, or species reintroduction, have provided much food for thought in discussions of ecological and environmental change in the modern era.<sup>3</sup> The narratives about environmental transformation that accompany the idea of rewilding were initially developed to reflect social, environmental, and political ideologies related to the American wilderness and the establishment of national parks in the United States, where those involved in converting environments back to a 'wild' state highlighted that transformation to 'wilderness' is in fact a process underscored by careful land management.<sup>4</sup> Discussions of what rewilding entails thus emphasize that rewilding is a tautological myth of ecological management, in which nature requires Man both to destroy and then to recreate. The process highlights the presence rather than absence of humans, and meticulous choices on their part, suggesting that future wildernesses will not actually represent an idyllic return to what was *before* the human, but instead exemplify a constructed symbiotic interconnection between humans and ecologies in which 'wilderness' is a social construct.<sup>5</sup> The French equivalent for this process, 'réensauvagement', frames the discussion in terms that fetishize the subaltern subject associated with the French word 'sauvage', and reinscribes the postcolonial dilemma into

<sup>2</sup> Dolly Jørgensen, 'Rethinking Rewilding', *Geoforum*, 65 (2015), 482–88 (p. 486).

<sup>3</sup> See Richard T. Corlett, 'The Role of Rewilding in Landscape Design for Conservation', *Current Landscape Ecology Reports*, 1 (2016), 127–33.

<sup>4</sup> See Neil Evernden in *The Social Creation of Nature* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), pp. 120–24, and differentiated from the concept of wildness expressed by David M. Graber in 'Resolute Biocentrism: The Dilemma of Wilderness in National Parks', in *Reinventing Nature? Responses to Postmodern Deconstruction*, ed. by Michael E. Soule and Gary Lease (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1995), pp. 123–35. For views of wilderness from America, see Wade Sikorski, 'Building Wilderness', in *In the Nature of Things: Language, Politics and the Environment*, ed. by Jane Bennett and William Chaloupka (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 24–43, and Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1996). The broadest conceptualization of the term includes 'accidental' rewilding and rewilding as the result of humanitarian disasters; see George Mombiot, 'The Beast Within (or How Not to Rewild)', in *Feral: Rewilding the Land, Sea and Human Life* (London: Penguin, 2013), pp. 186–208.

<sup>5</sup> See Graber, 'Resolute Biocentrism', p. 124. See also Nathalie Pettorelli, Sarah M. Durant, and Johan T. du Toit, 'Rewilding: A Captivating, Controversial Twenty-First-Century Concept to Address Ecological Degradation in a Changing World', in *Rewilding*, ed. by Nathalie Pettorelli, Sarah M. Durant, and Johan T. du Toit (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 1–11 (p. 8).

discussions of the wild.<sup>6</sup> This semantic impasse highlights the cultural specificity of wilderness in which human and nonhuman subjects are constantly rethought in relation to ideas of what constitutes an ecology or an environment.

The spur for modern rewilding can be traced back to premodern contexts in which land management was vital to changing concepts of species identity and ecological agency.<sup>7</sup> Medieval ideas about wild and cultivated environments varied, but the forests of the Western European Middle Ages were not necessarily wild spaces in the twenty-first-century sense, nor did they represent a frontier as in postcolonial contexts. A conceptual crossover between gardens and forests inscribed ‘wild’ qualities into areas and nonhuman species that were already managed and legislated as ‘a network in which more effort was often put into the preservation of nonhuman than human life’.<sup>8</sup> In literary contexts, the horticultural metaphor of the library as garden, and of writing as gardening, was distinguished from the trope of forests such as the one in which Yvain finds the lion, which were places of the *merveilleux*, places to get lost in, ‘unruly places where communication is threatened and slowed down’.<sup>9</sup> By contrast, saints’ lives could represent nature as undergoing a profound transformation in the presence of the epitome of humanity, ultimately generating a ‘restoration of Creation via sanctity’, a wilderness controlled as much by God as by humans.<sup>10</sup> The medieval wilderness thus becomes the place in which ‘the mysterious can act as a palpable force, often embodied in a being who is not necessarily bound by human rules’.<sup>11</sup> Medieval literary texts do not always frame environmental or ecological change in terms of human management of the environment, but aspects of what modern readers define as wilderness are present in tangible and codified ways in depictions of the sounds of forests and legendary creatures. Considering how the wild in medieval texts — be it a geographical location or an aspect of identity — is rewilded through adaptation

<sup>6</sup> See Régis Barraud and Michel Périgord, ‘L’Europe ensauvagée: émergence d’une nouvelle forme de patrimonialisation de la nature?’, *L’Espace géographique*, 42 (2013), 254–69. For further context, see William Cronon, ‘The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature’, in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. by William Cronon (New York: Norton, 1996), pp. 69–90; Catherine Mougenot, *Prendre soin de la nature ordinaire* (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l’homme, 2003); Paul Arnould and Éric Glon, ‘Wilderness, usages et perceptions de la nature en Amérique du Nord’, *Annales de géographie*, 649 (2006), 227–38; Fabrice Guizard-Duchamp, ‘Introduction générale’ to *Les Terres du sauvage dans le monde franc (IV<sup>e</sup>–IX<sup>e</sup> siècle)* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2009), pp. 13–21; Augustin Berque, ‘Le Sauvage construit’, *Ethnologie française*, 40 (2010), 589–96; and Peter Cairns and others, *Wild: nature sauvage d’Europe* (Paris: Éditions de la Martinière, 2010), p. 288.

<sup>7</sup> See Dolly Jørgensen, ‘Pigs and Pollards: Medieval Insights for UK Wood Pasture Restoration’, *Sustainability*, 5 (2013), 387–99; and John Hilary Martin OP, ‘The Land, Who Owns It?’, in *The Medieval World of Nature: A Book of Essays*, ed. by Joyce E. Salisbury (New York: Garland, 2020), pp. 167–85.

<sup>8</sup> Miranda Griffin, ‘“Unusual Greenness”: Approaching Medievalist Ecomaterialism’, *Exemplaria*, 30 (2018), 172–81 (p. 177).

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Hinton, ‘Conceptualizing Medieval Book Collections’, in *The Medieval Library*, ed. by Thomas Hinton and Luke Sunderland (= special issue, *French Studies*, 70.2 (2016)), pp. 171–86 (p. 183).

<sup>10</sup> Britton Elliott Brooks, *Restoring Creation: The Natural World in the Anglo-Saxon Saints’ Lives of Cuthbert and Guthlac* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2019), p. 291. See also Liam Lewis, ‘Noise on the Ocean before “Pollution”: The Voyage of Saint Brendan’, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 30 (2023).

<sup>11</sup> Gillian Rudd, *Brederly: Ecocritical Readings of Late Medieval English Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 92.

and management of sound, we gain a more radical and extensive understanding of sonic agency in the history of the wilderness.

While changes to soundscapes are usually neglected in discussions of modern rewilding projects, it is precisely representations of sound and transformation which help us to parse what is troubling about the wild in medieval texts, and to consider what is at stake in notions of the wild and rewilding. The ways that pre-modern cultures imagined the types of change we associate with rewilding today are articulated through an acoustemology (joining 'acoustic' with 'epistemology') of sound, in which knowing through sound reminds us that to be wild is in the first place to be composite and liminal, in between language and utterance, all the while being underwritten by the rules and frameworks of culture.<sup>12</sup> Encounters with partially unexplainable or unwritable sounds, such as the *cri* in French, demonstrate how the human imagination and cultural fantasies shape ideas of nature and culture, a process brought into sharp focus in medieval narratives such as *Yvain* that pit the wilderness against courtly society. The juxtaposition of speech and thought presentation with that of sound links human and animal vocalization and enables us to identify with precision pivotal changes to soundscapes in which characters, and especially legendary creatures, wander. In this article I bring together two case studies, *Yvain* and *Mélusine*, in which the *cri* marks narrative sites that disclose new perspectives on rewilding through connection with nonhuman agents. I argue that the *cri* discloses medieval sites of narrative rewilding in which protagonists are reinscribed into the process of being made wild as they move between contiguous ideas of culture and wilderness towards uncertain futures.

### *Wilding intersubjectivity in 'Yvain'*

The medieval category for vocalized sound, *vox*, was interrogated by scholars throughout the Middle Ages by analysing the sounds produced by nonhuman animals. The vocalizing agent's intention to produce sound posed a philosophical problem for scholars and writers, some of whom limited the capacity of intention to the human alone.<sup>13</sup> This problem is brought into relief in episodes of literary texts that express the *cri* through a nonhuman agent. To take an example from Bérout's *Roman de Tristan*, the dog Husdent repeatedly emits a 'cri' rather than

<sup>12</sup> See Brigitte Cazelles, *Soundscape in Early French Literature* (Tempe, AZ: Brepols, 2005), p. 20. For the term 'acoustemology', see Steven Feld, 'Waterfalls of Song: Acoustemology of Place Resounding in Bosavi, Papua New Guinea', in *Senses of Place*, ed. by Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 1996), pp. 91–135. For a vivid acoustemological analysis, see Thorsten Gieser, 'Sensing and Knowing Noises: An Acoustemology of the Chainsaw', *Social Anthropology/ Anthropologie sociale*, 27 (2019), 50–61.

<sup>13</sup> See Umberto Eco and others, 'On Animal Language in the Medieval Classification of Signs', in *On the Medieval Theory of Signs*, ed. by Umberto Eco and Costantino Marmo (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1989), pp. 3–41. For Peter Abelard a sound is meaningful because of the will that produces it and not for the fact that it itself produces meaning, while Roger Bacon emphasized that 'the wail of the infirm and the bark of the dog spring from an intention, an impulse of a sensitive soul which tends to express that which the animal (human or not) feels', as quoted by Eco and others in 'On Animal Language', pp. 15–20. For a literary angle on animal sound, see Jean-Marie Fritz, *La Cloche et la lyre: pour une poésie médiévale du paysage sonore* (Geneva: Droz, 2011).

a bark, suggesting that what we are hearing in these scenes is not the articulate measure of a dog's utterance, but a more ambiguous form of sound that defies neat attempts at categorization such as the *latratus canis*.<sup>14</sup> This is not to suggest that medieval texts do not offer referential precision for nonhuman sounds; rather, the *cri* features alongside more precise sound descriptors, serving as a key item of vocabulary that destabilizes fixed conceptions of what constitutes a nonhuman sound.<sup>15</sup> In doing so, the *cri* can be read against the grain of conservative discussions of sound, as vocalizations are rendered wild by featuring in carefully managed narratives that recount a movement between courtly and wilderness spaces. This is the case for a pivotal narrative rewilding project in the infamous medieval romance of the knight with the lion.

The episode of the mysterious *cri* in my epigraph from *Yvain* is an addition to a broader textual soundscape in which representations of sounds accompany a clash of natural and cultural imagery, the former of which is explicitly referenced through the allegorical figure of Nature (*Yvain*, l. 796). At the beginning of his quest, Yvain throws water on a fountain in the forest, unleashing a storm and thus triggering his adventure. As he pushes forth into the wilderness, the text presents readers with the lexical triggers for narrative change through the sounds of birds. Birdsong, described earlier in the text as harmonious polyphony (*Yvain*, ll. 463–67) and later through the metaphor of 'joie merveillouse' [wondrous joy, *Yvain*, l. 807] acts as a dramatic accompaniment to narrative tension as Yvain awaits his adversary, the guardian of a magical fountain. The guardian arrives with a 'grant bruit' [great noise, *Yvain*, l. 811], as loud as a hunt for a stag in rut, a simile signalling a major shift in narrative direction and enclosing the action of Yvain's ensuing battle in the sounds of forest fauna. The sound here underscoring Yvain's transformation from courtly knight to wild quester is the ambiguous 'bruit', that is, a sound more akin to noise or a clamour than an articulate nonhuman vocalization. Even before we hear the *cri*, the text presents an environment of sound that does more to destabilize our perception of this wild soundscape than it does to offer clarity on events that take place away from court.

The context for the scene with the mysterious *cri* reveals how this sound descriptor acts as a signal for narrative rewilding as the sound plays an important role in Yvain's recovery from living as a 'hom forsenés et sauvage' [mad and wild man, *Yvain*, l. 2828]. The text recounts how Yvain had previously engaged on a pre-established *aventure* in the forest of Brocéliande, eventually leading to his marriage to the Lady of Landuc, the epitome of his courtly ambition. Tempted by other knights to return to a life of questing, and in the excitement of tournaments,

<sup>14</sup> See two examples from the hunting scenes in Bérout's *Le Roman de Tristan*: 'En la janbe s'est esgenez, | A terre met le nes, si crie' [He hurt his paw, picked up the scent, and barked, ll. 1516–17], and 'Husdent li bauz en crie en haut, | Li bois du cri au chien resone' [The joyful Husdent barked loud and clear. The forest resounded with dog barking, ll. 1610–11]; Bérout, *Le Roman de Tristan, poème du xiiie siècle*, ed. by Ernest Muret (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1957). For the *latratus canis*, see Eco and others, 'On Animal Language'.

<sup>15</sup> For further examples, see Liam Lewis, *Animal Soundscapes in Anglo-Norman Texts* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2022). For the 'cri' of the lion, see pp. 41–47, and for the mandrake, pp. 56–67.

Yvain subsequently forgets about his lady. Just over halfway through the tale he breaks his important promise to return to her after a year has passed. He loses her favour and spends the rest of the narrative trying to win it back, killing a giant and releasing captured prisoners, but only after spending a significant period as a mad and wild man in the forest. Yvain is shocked out of this state and brought back to his quest by the most significant sound in the text — a *cri* from the depths of the forest. Described as ‘dolereus’ [painful] and ‘haut’ [loud], the *cri* is initially not tagged to a specific agent; it could have been produced by either the lion or the serpent attacking it. Unlike the setting of birdsong, the ambiguity as to which of the agents emits the *cri* invites the protagonist to investigate and respond to the sound. Yvain must choose which of the nonhuman agents he should save. His cognitive process is swift enough to enable him to intervene, a fact which emphasizes his subjective experience and understanding of the sound as an opportunity for managing his quest. Jolted out of his reverie, he jumps into the fray to save the lion, a prominent symbol of Christ and heraldic figure during the Middle Ages.

The text exploits the ambiguity of sound description in order to capitalize on the tensions that are created by placing a courtly character into a situation in which he becomes wild in more subjective ways than the objective concept of the soundscape allows for.<sup>16</sup> Sound acts as a catalyst for narrative rewilding and this analysis chimes with Zrinka Stahuljak’s observation that narrative hiatus, here signalled on the sonic level, ‘creates the time for comprehending, a non-narrative temporality of thinking on the spot’, or ‘thinking in emergency’.<sup>17</sup> In a way that mirrors the temporal urgency of modern rewilding narratives, the process of thinking in emergency in *Yvain* establishes human–nonhuman intersubjectivity and situated performativity as components of narrative development, shifting away from Yvain’s stint alone in the wilderness and towards a rewilded quest story. The *cri* simultaneously produces a performative, acoustic act of utterance that counters a presumed separation of experience and knowledge, as Yvain intuitively understands the ‘cri’ as signifying that the lion must be saved. In terms that emphasize an acoustemology of sound as a fertile reading strategy, the *cri* leads to a form of intersubjective self-realization and a renewed vigour to accomplish feats of chivalry, a process evinced by Yvain and the lion’s new, composite identity. Intersubjectivity leads to a fusing of the pair into a complex social, biological, and religious identity structure harnessing Yvain’s social status with the lion’s brutal strength and wild unpredictability. This new identity demonstrates how, in medieval romance, configurations

<sup>16</sup> The term ‘soundscape’, derived from ‘landscape’, reinforces a visual metaphor for recording sound, and does not offer a vocabulary to discuss the subjective experience of sound. For criticism, see Timothy Ingold, ‘Against Soundscape’, in *Autumn Leaves: Sound and the Environment in Artistic Practice*, ed. by Angus Carlyle (Paris: Double-Entendre, 2007), pp. 10–13; Ari Y. Kelman, ‘Rethinking the Soundscape: A Critical Genealogy of a Key Term in Sound Studies’, *The Senses and Society*, 5 (2015), 212–34; Liam Lewis, ‘Animal Umwelt and Sound Milieus in the Middle English *Physiologus*’, *Exemplaria*, 34 (2022), 24–39 (pp. 26–27); and Lewis, *Animal Soundscapes*, pp. 25–26.

<sup>17</sup> Zrinka Stahuljak, ‘Adventures in Wonderland: Between Experience and Knowledge’, in Zrinka Stahuljak and others, *Thinking through Chrétien de Troyes* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2011), pp. 75–110 (pp. 78–79).

of overlapping agencies spread out in entanglements ‘across the boundaries of the human and the nonhuman, the organic and the artificial, the physical and the representational’.<sup>18</sup>

Images of wilderness and the *sauvage* establish key thematic anchors for Yvain’s quest, against which sonic descriptors such as *bruit* and *cri* act as reinforcers of narrative and identity rewilding. The mapping of wilderness through natural imagery demonstrates how medieval romances such as *Yvain* ‘throw into question conventional assumptions about specifically human constructions of subjectivity and embodiment’.<sup>19</sup> The most striking example of a ‘wild’ character in this text not directly related to Yvain’s own subjectivity is in descriptions of the strangely inhuman oxherd in the woods who seems to be able to keep ‘tors sauvages’ [wild bulls, *Yvain*, l. 278] unenclosed in the forest. Yvain’s encounter with this wild man foreshadows his own yoking of the natural and the cultural. After placing himself under the authority of the personified entity Amour (*Yvain*, l. 1448), the loss of his lady’s favour leads him to want to go alone into ‘sauvage terre’ [wild lands, *Yvain*, l. 2785]. As a hermit provides for him, a narratorial intervention offers a sharp analysis of what wilderness entails through a proverbial statement suggesting that there is no ‘beste sauvage’ [wild animal, *Yvain*, l. 2870] that does not return to a place where it is well treated, provided it has some sense to it, an axiom that may offer some theoretical explanation for the lion’s partnership with Yvain after being saved from the fiery grip of the serpent.

Yvain’s transformation from questing knight to wild man is superseded by the sonic narrative impulse generated by the *cri*, which changes him again and acts as a form of identity rewilding. The *cri* wakes Yvain from his madness in the wilderness, returning him from a dream state to a quest in which his identity is now a mixture of natural and cultural experience that the narrator carefully manages through the depiction of Yvain and the lion’s relationship. The sound of the lion’s anguish communicated through the *cri* locates Yvain in the present moment, allowing him to manage his newfound identity through the clarity of his decision-making. The outcome is a composite assemblage of knight and lion incorporating the codification of exemplary redemption and leonine aggression. The *cri* is thus a signal for the rewilding of a knight to a cross-species assemblage that brings the *sauvage* back to the court and to the quest, a rewilding that points towards future cohabitation rather than the expression of a singular anthropocentrism.

Just as rewilding narratives in modern discourse force us to reconsider the power relations that underwrite human management of environmental change, in this *roman* a mode of reading that is attentive to rewilding encourages us to consider the asymmetrical balance of power that underscores the sensory experience of multiple characters and their living conditions. This is particularly the case when scenes of social realism are compared to Yvain’s more enchanting quest with the

<sup>18</sup> Miranda Griffin, ‘Figures in the Landscape: Encounters and Entanglements in the Medieval Wilderness’, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 49 (2019), 501–20 (p. 505).

<sup>19</sup> Griffin, ‘Figures in the Landscape’, p. 516.

lion. During Yvain's quest to liberate the prisoners at the *chastel de Pesme Aventure*, the local inhabitants shout out to prevent him going any further:

Tantost Mesire Yvains s'adreche  
 Vers le tour et les gens s'escriënt.  
 Trestuit a haute vois li criënt:  
 'Hu! hu! Maleüreus, ou vas?' (*Yvain*, ll. 5124–27)  
 [Sir Yvain went straight to the tower while the people shouted. All together they shouted loudly to him, 'Hey! hey! Sorry soul, where are you going?']

When he passes the noisy crowd, Yvain comes face to face with the 'reality' of slavery, as he meets 300 enslaved women who have been sent to work for two demons. Against this narrative backdrop combining religious and social realism, it is sound that contributes the warning to Yvain's quest. The crying of the town's inhabitants, notably through the verb 'crier', heralds a form of social realism that jars with the use of the *cri* as a descriptor for more immaterial forms of human and animal pain. In contrast, sight gives the final confirmation of the horrific conditions under which the women, starving and miserable, are being put to work.

While descriptions of crying describe a specific type of noise uttered, the narrator juxtaposes such sounds with an interrogation of the author's own craft. Early in his quest, as Yvain hears the lament of the lady whose husband he has killed, the narrator riffs on the syllable '-cri-' to create a series of metapoetic puns linking the narrator's act of describing what the protagonist hears with the act of writing itself:

Mesire Yvains oÿ les cris  
 Et le duel, qui ja n'iert descris,  
 Quë on ne le porroit descrire,  
 Ne tix ne fu escris en livre. (*Yvain*, ll. 1173–76)  
 [Sir Yvain hears the cries and the pain, which will never be written, because it would be impossible to describe, and never has its like been written in a book.]

The ambiguous act of interpreting the 'cri' (or 'cris', above) mirrors the impossibility of describing heightened emotional pain in words. The text thus highlights what François Noudelmann has described as the ability of the *cri* in French to bypass simple oppositions between noun and verb, or the dichotomy of articulate and inarticulate that frames much discussion of nonhuman sound, even today. *Yvain* demonstrates how the *cri* is situated in embodied forms of sonic expression and interpretation, operating 'dans les mots et les idées, par sa manière de souffler, d'intensifier le flux verbal'.<sup>20</sup> The narrator brings our attention to this semantic impasse by showing how language resists the precise linguistic reference points we might expect from an accomplished writer, perhaps thus wilding the writing process itself.

*Yvain* highlights the embodiment of wilderness in forest spaces not only by writing the knight into a wild soundscape, but also by demonstrating that Yvain

<sup>20</sup> François Noudelmann, *Penser avec les oreilles* (Paris: Max Milo, 2019), p. 86. See also Alain Marc, *Écrire le cri: Sade, Bataille, Maikowski* (Orléans: L'Écarlate, 2000).



and the lion continue to emulate aspects of the wild through their behaviours and sounds, even after their return to the questing narrative. Later in the text, the narrator once again hesitates when describing the nature of a nonhuman sound in writing as, on return to the fountain, Yvain faints and the lion cries out in distress:

Ains de riens nule duel gregneur  
 N'oïstes conter ne retraire  
 Quë il encommencha a faire:  
 Il se detort et grate et crie,  
 Et s'a talant quë il s'ochie  
 De l'espee dont est maris,  
 Qui a son boin seigneur ochis. (*Yvain*, ll. 3504–10)

[Never have you heard told or spoken of such deep anguish as that which he began to display. He writhes, scratches, and cries out, and he wants to kill himself with the sword responsible for his affliction, that which killed his good lord.]

The impossibility of describing the lion's distress relies on another metapoetic technique based on the juxtaposition of verbs describing the narration of a story — 'conter' and 'retraire' — with the wild cry of the nonhuman animal. What Yvain takes on when he names himself the knight with the lion is therefore much more than a material assemblage of human and animal, of bodily and symbolic. The text places this assemblage in between a position of articulate language (anticipated in verbs that describe narration) and inarticulate sound (the *cri*), inducing a state of continuous narrative rewilding developed from the porous boundaries between species.

The transformations heralded by the *cri* in *Yvain* have distinct parallels with modern notions of rewilding as a return to wilderness, a process nevertheless underscored by strategic thinking and the careful management of human–nonhuman subjectivities. Yvain moves from culture to nature, finding himself at a midway point between the two as an expression of intersubjective 'naturalcultural' chivalric identity.<sup>21</sup> However — in contrast to modern rewilding narratives — rather than the transformation of the landscape through which he travels, it is Yvain and his narrative that undergo a process of rewilding in which Yvain must also forge a new identity and reputation as a knight in partnership with the untamed lion. The *cri* codifies narrative pivots at which his own identity, and subsequently his fate as a knight in his own right, transform away from the 'lieus estranges et sauvages' [strange and wild places, *Yvain*, l. 763] in which Yvain began his quest, and towards an existence in between the *merveilleux* and the court, between the imaginary and social realism. As the narrative zooms into the symbiotic relationship between knight and lion, this sound descriptor offers a challenge to the idea of rational human language, so often identified with the production of meaning and *logos*, and tests the questing knight's capacity for thinking in emergency based on

<sup>21</sup> The terms 'naturecultures' and 'naturalcultural' are now used widely in critical theory and anthropology to express the enmeshment of the concepts of nature and culture, as in Bruno Latour, *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes: essai d'anthropologie symétrique* (Paris: La Découverte, 1997), p. 22; and Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 25.

the affective experience of hearing the lion's *cri* of pain. The *cri* calls to cross-species intersubjectivity between a leonine and a human body, which are bound in new material, temporal, and sonic assemblages, all of which are self-consciously managed by a narrator speculative about the capacity of writing to describe such wild pain accurately. Yvain's quest thus shifts from its cultural apogee in marriage and land ownership, through a stint as *sauvage*, and back towards a rewilded state of being, putting the knight in a continuous state of flux.

### *Mélusine's wild abyss*

As in modern French, French texts from the Middle Ages use the noun 'cri' as a descriptor to convey a range of sounds, not just a cry, but also a call, shout, scream, shriek, holler, clamour, proclamation, even a roar. Like its verbal relative, 'crier', the 'cri' is often used in medieval texts as part of compound expressions, joined with Old French verbs such as 'faire', 'geter', or 'lever'; a 'cri' can thus be fabricated, hurled out by an agent, or raised against another. This is the case in an example from the tale of medieval French literature's most notorious snake-woman, Mélusine. Having spent a long time as a human at court, Mélusine is forced to transform into a 'serpente' and fly away from her home forever:

Lors a fait la dame, en guise de serpente comme j'ay dit dessus, trois tours environ la forteresse et a chascune foiz qu'elle passoit devant la fenestre, elle gectoit un cry si merueilleux et si doulereux que chascun en plouroit de pitié. [...] il sembloit, partout ou elle passoit, que la foldre et la tempeste y deust cheoir.<sup>22</sup>

[In the form of a serpent as I have just described, the lady went thrice around the tower of the fortress. Each time she passed in front of the window, she emitted a *cri* so extraordinary and painful that everyone cried in pity. [...] It seemed that lightning and storms would fall from the sky wherever she went.]

The *cri* signifies rewilding in the tale of *Mélusine* in ways that focus attention on how sound generates distinctive forms of knowing and understanding narrative transformation.<sup>23</sup> It resonates with Noudelmann's observation that the *cri* is a non-linguistic form of expression linking the human ability to cry with a range of feelings and values. He remarks that we must continuously bring into question the illusory generalization of words such as *cri*, which represent 'un dispositif sonore grâce auquel une parole et une écriture résonnent singulièrement'.<sup>24</sup> Noudelmann's assertion that both speech and writing resound through this sonic device is confirmed by the ways that the *cri* demands to be interpreted by those who hear it

<sup>22</sup> Jean d'Arras, *Mélusine, ou La Noble Histoire de Lusignan*, ed. by Jean-Jacques Vincensini (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 2003), p. 704. Translations of *Mélusine* from Old French to modern English are my own, based on Vincensini.

<sup>23</sup> The author of *Mélusine* uses a variant spelling, 'cry', variants being common in the Middle Ages. However, for the purposes of this discussion, I continue to identify this word as 'cri' to emphasize wider significations than the English 'cry'.

<sup>24</sup> Noudelmann, *Penser avec les oreilles*, p. 91. Literary texts are primed to achieve this, as Noudelmann notes: 'les textes littéraires, par leur textualité même, leur tissu, ont vocation à faire entendre ces échos, des résidus de sons et de voix qui s'articulent à quantité d'autres éléments sensibles et imaginaires' (p. 169).

and by the narrator's attention to the process of describing it. And yet, the *cri* in *Mélusine* performs a subtly different function to that found in *Yvain*; rather than positioning the characters and the narrative as being in flux, this *cri* heralds the eponymous protagonist's suspension from the courtly realm and her progress towards the abyss of wilderness.

Whereas *Yvain*'s assemblage with the lion emphasizes their shared subjectivity in living together, *Mélusine*'s transformation implies a change in physical form witnessed by her previous subjects, the people of Lusignan. The *cri* that accompanies her transformation marks her as a wild creature at once managed by the narrative structure and the courtly customs represented in the text, and simultaneously beyond the control of human command. The text draws attention to the disruptive power of the sound of her *cri* by linking it to her voice and her physical body, and describing the listeners' reaction to the sound: 'ceulx de la forteresse et de la ville furent tous esbahiz et ne sçorent que penser, car ilz voient la figure d'une serpente et oÿent la voix d'une dame qui yssoit de lui' [those in the fortress and the town were stupefied and perplexed, because they saw the body of a serpent and heard the voice of a lady coming from it, *Mélusine*, pp. 704–06]. At first, the *cri* establishes linguistic and embodied ambiguity in a way that no other sound descriptor in either Old French or modern French can. However, regardless of whether or not the listeners recognize the voice of a lady in the *cri*, *Mélusine*'s hopes of womanhood, and of maternal connection and dynasty, are shattered in the rewilding of her body and voice, an abjection expressed by her vocalized *cri*, which acts as a narrative pivot from which she can never return. The same motif recurs in a final episode, in which she appears on the walls of the Tour Poitevine before her children, and twice utters a pained *cri*:

si les encline et gecte un si horrible et si douloureux cry qu'il sembla proprement a tous ceulx qui l'ouirent que la forteresse fondist en abisme. [...] et quant elle vit ses enfans plourer, si ot grant douleur et gecta un cry grant et merveilleux, et sembla a tous que la forteresse fondist en abysme. (*Mélusine*, p. 770)

[She leaned towards them and let out such a terrible and anguished *cri* that it seemed to all those who heard it as if the fortress was falling into an abyss. [...] And when she saw her children crying, she felt such pain that she let out a great, marvellous *cri*, and it seemed to all that the fortress fell into the abyss.]

In these episodes of profound identity and narrative rewilding, the text describes *Mélusine* in ways that render her significantly other-than-human through the power of her *cri*. She utters this sound as images of thunder and chasms resonate on sonic and visual levels. Yet, her vocalized sound establishes a bridge between human and nonhuman utterance that communicates her emotional state to the human listeners in the text, and to the reader. These passages demonstrate *Mélusine*'s inability to maintain a division between nature and culture. Such distinctions collapse as she is torn from her family and pushed into the wild, framed by the image of the abyss.

Underlying *Mélusine*'s serpentine form, and also her voice, is a notion of wilderness that is shaped by human fantasies and cultural imagination, and that resonates with the type of rewilding under discussion here. The fourteenth-century *Mélusine* by Jean d'Arras is one of the first literary versions of the story of

Mélusine, the eponymous, serpentine fairy who is cursed by her mother to spend every Saturday in the hybrid form of half-woman, from the navel upwards, and half-serpent, below. Mélusine is cursed early in the text by her mother Presine for having imprisoned her father Elinas with the help of her two sisters. King Elinas of Scotland had been travelling through a forest near to a fountain, where he had heard Presine's melodious, sweet, angelic 'voix feminine' [feminine voice, *Mélusine*, p. 122], a description that compares her voice to legendary creatures that ensnare men: 'oncques seraine, faee ne nimphe ne chanta tant doucement' [no siren, fairy or nymph sung so sweetly, *Mélusine*, p. 122]. Presine forbids Elinas from seeing her give birth, generating the legendary topos of the forbidden sight of the female body, which foreshadows Mélusine's own weekly transformations into a snake-woman.<sup>25</sup> The tale then narrates how Mélusine marries a mortal man, Raymondin, and supports the exponential rise of the House of Lusignan through their sons' crusades and adventures, although Raymondin is bound by similar prohibitions against seeing Mélusine on certain occasions.<sup>26</sup> Towards the end of the story, Raymondin breaks this prohibition, which triggers Mélusine's transformation back to her serpentine form. Alongside prohibitions against sight, the text also heavily invests in sound as a disruptive feature of serpentine and female identity.

*Mélusine* is a succession of dramatic sequences that highlight the fantastic nature of Mélusine and her family. Their exponential expansion highlights the importance of territory and of a distinction between cultivated and wild landscapes, themes that are crucial to the foundation of the House of Lusignan. Mélusine's initial supernatural feats cement herself within natural-cultural networks: castles spring up at an alarming rate under her fairy guidance; her sons are given magic rings to protect them from danger on their various quests; hidden tombs are discovered; and formidable armies and giants fought and conquered. Mélusine counteracts the instability of her cursed hybrid form by enabling her husband to acquire territory using the same ruse Dido deployed when she founded Carthage — a magical extension of the skin of a deer to delineate the boundaries of the land Raymondin wishes to be his own.<sup>27</sup> The text thus blends natural and cultural phenomena in the *merveilleux*, the thin veil of liminality that separates the human and fairy worlds in medieval literary cultures. Raymondin even draws attention to this when he remarks that his wife is dear to him because she is the source of all his worldly

<sup>25</sup> See Denyse Delcourt, 'Métamorphose, mystère et féminité: lecture du roman de Mélusine par Jean d'Arras', *Le Moyen français*, 33 (1993), 85–107; Stephen G. Nichols, 'Melusine between Myth and History: Profile of a Female Demon', in *Melusine of Lusignan: Founding Fiction in Late Medieval France*, ed. by Donald Maddox and Sara Sturm-Maddox (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), pp. 137–64; and Sylvia Huot, 'Dangerous Embodiments: Froissart's Harton and Jean d'Arras's Melusine', *Speculum*, 78 (2003), 400–20.

<sup>26</sup> The House of Lusignan may take its name from Mélusine, as a hybrid configuration of 'Mélusine' as 'Mère-Lusignan'. See Michèle Perret, 'Attribution et utilisation du nom propre dans *Mélusine*', in *Mélinusines continentales et insulaires: actes du colloque international tenu les 27 et 28 mars à l'Université Paris XII et au Collège des Irlandais*, ed. by Jeanne-Marie Boivin and Proinsias MacCana (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1999), pp. 169–79; and Miranda Griffin, *Transforming Tales: Rewriting Metamorphosis in Medieval French Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 151.

<sup>27</sup> Virgil, *Aeneid*, Book 1, ll. 367–68. See also Christopher Lucken, 'Roman de Mélusine ou Histoire de Lusignan? La fable de l'histoire', in *Mélinusines continentales et insulaires*, ed. by Boivin and MacCana, pp. 139–67 (pp. 150–51).

possessions ('biens terriens', *Mélusine*, p. 210) and the primary route for the salvation of his soul. The superhuman exploits of Mélusine's sons also generate a sense of dynastic stability and familial power as they conquer various lands (Cyprus, Prague, Luxembourg, Ireland) and assert their authority over numerous peoples, the sounds of fighting accompanying the expansion of their territory.<sup>28</sup>

Mélusine's body is marked by the boundaries between human and nonhuman, since understanding it as either actually or potentially a human body draws attention to the way in which its boundaries between inside and outside are necessarily unstable. The serpent invokes and disrupts the notion of the human proper, at once setting up a boundary between Mélusine and her courtly futurity and giving her access to distinctly nonhuman forms of knowledge and power. As Miranda Griffin observes, one of the driving themes of this text is that of boundaries, be they territorial, familial, or bodily.<sup>29</sup> Through her marriage to a mortal man she had received the gift of partial life as a 'femme naturelle' [woman of human nature, *Mélusine*, p. 136], which brought her temporary relief from her curse of cross-species hybridity. Yet, what Griffin describes as 'women's serpentine truth' in some medieval textual cultures is shown in *Mélusine* to be a carefully managed and reconstructed form of courtly motherhood and regency now lost.<sup>30</sup> This occurs in a scene of identity rewilding that remains remarkably obscure to human perception. Against their marriage contract, Raymondin spies on Mélusine while she is bathing one Saturday, the only time that she takes on human-serpent form. After peeping through a hole in the door, Raymondin tells her he knows her secret. In the scene of inexorable transformation recounted above, Mélusine remorsefully transforms into a serpent and flies away from him forever. The drawn-out episode of separation between the lovers leaves Raymondin in a state of sensory deprivation: 'si est si atteint de douleur qu'il ne voit ne ot ne entent ne ne scet contenance' [he is in such anguish that he is unable to see, hear, or understand anything, or know what to do, *Mélusine*, p. 696]. This deprivation of sensory experience mirrors the effects of Presine's siren-like song at the beginning of the tale and reinforces the affective experience of hearing Mélusine's *cri*. Furthermore, Mélusine is not to be seen again except to care for her children and as an apparition in legend, a controlled form of exclusion from courtly society that enables her to restore herself as a mother and reintroduce herself as a composite series of legendary and ecological symbols. Her return to the wild is thus soaked in cultural discourse, reflecting how rewilding is always a process of careful management.

Set against the backdrop of Mélusine's prowess as a courtly lady, her *cri* encapsulates a distinct narrative form of rewilding as she transforms from a woman into

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, the episode in which King Selodus burns the body of King Frederick of Bohemia in front of the gates of Prague: 'Et quant ceulx l'entendent, si gectent tous ensemble un cry hault et grant' [When they heard these words, they cried out unanimously, clear and powerful, *Mélusine*, p. 522], or at the death of the giant Gardon: 'Et le jayant chiet et giette un cry' [The giant fell, and let out a cry, *Mélusine*, p. 674].

<sup>29</sup> Griffin, *Transforming Tales*, p. 141.

<sup>30</sup> Griffin, *Transforming Tales*, p. 147.

a serpent. The process is most strongly perceived by the people of Lusignan as a sound as powerful as a storm, a common trope in depictions of sirens in some medieval bestiaries.<sup>31</sup> The presence of listeners who interpret the *cri* demonstrates that this sound is both the expression and cause of an intelligible emotion. The *cri* is the product of a curse, which has now been confirmed through the transgression of a taboo and made public for all to hear.<sup>32</sup> Raymondin's visual, and subsequent vocal, revelation of Mélusine's true form shatters forever her hopes of remaining a woman, engendering a disastrous prophecy of the fall of the House of Lusignan. Crucially for this discussion on rewilding, it is human intervention that causes her paradoxically to bring back the suppressed wild and to leave her family to an uncertain fate. Unlike the *cri* of the lion in *Yvain*, this is not a sound that triggers emergency thinking in its listeners. Instead, the powerful nature of the sound renders them helpless. The cultural and the natural merge in a different way in this text to highlight the multiplicity of Mélusine's utterance as female speech, which emerges 'as something other than what is expected by patriarchal standards, something mysteriously elusive and unknown to man', something wild.<sup>33</sup>

Mélusine thwarts the humans' attempts to perceive and understand clearly, not only through ambiguity of form, but also through the association of her voice with the evocative *cri*. The text offers the framework for understanding this staggering transformation in the terms of science and religious understanding, which nevertheless cannot explain all of God's creation. The narrator provides a framework for interpreting marvellous things by beginning his story with a discourse on the nature of knowledge, including understanding mysterious or strange forms, and a discussion of human sensory perception, which is never infallible after the biblical Fall. Such decoding leads to clarity of knowing ('savoir au cler'), couched in vocabulary similar to that used to describe sound in Old French texts when a 'cri' is emitted 'haut et cler':

L'en treuve tant de merveilles, selon commune estimation, et si nouvelles que humain entendement est contraint de dire les jugemens de Dieu sont abisme sans fons et sans rive. Et sont ces choses merueilleuses et en tant de formes et manieres diverses, et en tant de paÿs selon leur diverse nature espandues, que, sauf meilleur jugement, je cuide qu'onques homme, se Adam non, n'ot parfaicte congnoissance des euvres invisibles de Dieu, pour quoy il ne puist de jour en jour prouffiter en science et oïr ou veoir chose qu'il ne puist croire estre veritables, lesquelles le sont.

[There are so many marvellous things which people commonly call extraordinary or bizarre that human understanding is forced to admit that God's judgements are an abyss with neither end nor sides. And these things are so extraordinary, so strange in their forms and their ways of being, and they are widespread in so many lands in their diverse natures, that I am persuaded

<sup>31</sup> The siren is said to sing in or over a tempest and weep in fair weather. This is taken as a fearful lesson for sailors who might succumb to the sound and fall asleep, only to be captured and drowned by the siren. See Florence McCulloch, *Medieval Latin and French Bestiaries* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1962), pp. 167–69, and Lewis, *Animal Soundscapes*, pp. 47–56.

<sup>32</sup> Griffin, *Transforming Tales*, p. 159.

<sup>33</sup> E. Jane Burns, 'Knowing Women: Female Orifices in Old French Farce and Fabliau', *Exemplaria*, 4 (1992), 81–104 (p. 91).

that, subject to a better interpretation, nobody — apart from Adam — has ever had a perfect knowledge of the invisible works of God. Such knowledge would allow a person to grow daily in understanding and to hear or see things that would seem unbelievable, and which, nevertheless, are so.]

Through a process of identity rewilding, *Mélusine* establishes the sense that the eponymous protagonist's story is a figment of the imagination, an echo from a liminal fairy space in between overlapping zones of nature and culture, a secret of God barely comprehensible to the ordinary human. By framing *Mélusine*'s nature and form as a secret of God ('son secret', *Mélusine*, p. 816), saturated in symbols which the reader is enjoined to decode, the text posits that her expulsion from the courtly world might not be a complete loss. Instead, this is a process of reintroducing the serpentine creature as legend into a wild abyss for audiences to reflect on in the future.

Rewilding in the tale of *Mélusine* is a process signalled by the *cri*, which places *Mélusine*'s lands back under the jurisdiction of human, rather than supernatural, control. Her *cri* is a signal for narrative transformation as she takes wild ecology with her out beyond the realm of Lusignan while her husband's lands come under the threat of invasion and human, rather than nonhuman, treachery. The *cri* is both marvellous and an expression of anguish, heralding *Mélusine*'s permanent identity transformation to wildness, and her abjection to the abyss of unknowing. Read through the lens of rewilding, her wilderness is certainly not an exact return to what was *before* her first encounter with humans. Instead, it represents the unravelling of her symbiotic relationship with humans, a process that nevertheless points to her human counterparts as the cause of ecological and environmental transformation.

### Conclusion

The modern rewilding project is affective as well as empirical.<sup>34</sup> It highlights not only the constitutive components of landscapes and ecologies, but also suggests that what constitutes human nature is a desire to cultivate and manage environments. While the term 'rewilding' is often used to interpret the restoration of ecosystems as reverting to previously conceptualized norms, usually measured through biological and visual changes, the medieval texts in this discussion demonstrate that rewilding as a critical frame must also balance the material, embodied, and affective components of sound description and its effects. Sound reveals multiple agents — a serpent, a lion, a knight, a courtly dame — in carefully managed scenarios in which human influences are carried over into new narratives, unfamiliar environments, and transformed identities. The multiple interpretations associated with sound descriptors such as the *cri* generate space to think with the ears, to consider sounds and ecologies as relational, and to dislocate narratives based on fixed distinctions between the human and nonhuman, nature and culture, or

<sup>34</sup> See Monbiot, *Feral*, p. 106.

articulate and inarticulate forms of language. As a widespread sound descriptor in Old French, expressing both human and nonhuman forms of vocalization, the *cri* demonstrates the ubiquity of sound-thinking. Human and at other times nonhuman agents that emit or hear a *cri* generally move away from centralized positions of reference and interpretation, towards ambiguity and relationality. Narrative rewilding through the *cri* is thus about drawing attention to how protagonists and texts address wilderness as a social construct.

Moments of rewilding encapsulated by the *cri* in *Yvain* and *Mélusine* generate fabulous and spectacular impressions of narrative pivots that transform characters and reveal new narrative perspectives on their identities. Each of these texts demonstrates how rewilding can be a critical mode for reading medieval texts when sound punctures the perceived stability of the narrative and guides protagonists towards carefully managed narrative structures. But rewilding with the *cri* disrupts rather than fixes modes of reading, and sound description in these two texts offers multiple interpretive possibilities. The description of human and nonhuman characters crying out in *Yvain* creates entanglements between images of crying and writing and suggests that the *cri* represents a form of ambiguous sound-making that moves the protagonists through wilderness, eventually to return to court as a remodelled assemblage. Sound gives access to a form of emergency thinking that demonstrates the intersubjective experience of such assemblages in a narrative juxtaposing fantasy with social realism. In contrast, the *cri* in *Mélusine* establishes a boundary between the human and nonhuman worlds, disentangling the eponymous character's human entanglements and forcing her back into the wilderness. While humans may carefully manage environments, *Mélusine* imagines a sharp divide between the human and the nonhuman experience of transformation, reinforced through the serpent woman's body and voice, as well as the narrator's musings on the limits of human perception and understanding. In each of these texts, reading narrative change through the lens of rewilding enables us to better conceptualize how literary texts use legendary creatures and their environments to destroy and recreate perceptions of transformation. A rewilded reading mode encourages us to consider the asymmetrical balance of power that ensues in an apparent tension between wild and cultured in the human imagination. This enables us to imagine not what was before the human, but rather the reimagined wild and how it casts a net across the human and the nonhuman.