Studia z Dziejów Średniowiecza, t. 28, 2025

Izabella Byler
(Uniwersytet Wrocławski)

A river, a man, and an animal: an ecocritical look at two Arthurian romances

https://doi.org/10.26881/sds.2025.28.03

Keywords: ecocriticism, river, water, animal companions, Middle Dutch chivalric romances, Arthurian romances

Introduction

Medieval chivalric romances can be generally perceived as stories full of adventures and heroic deeds, set in a world of kings, knights, and wonders. As a matter of fact, romances were partially intended to exemplify the ideals dominant in contemporary society.[1] The stories consist of a series of adventures, a quest, during which the protagonist faces perils in order to eventually restore order and gain acclaim.[2] Through their recognisable structure and distinctive setting, medieval romances can nowadays be perceived as timeless, fascinating works exemplifying the medieval world of the past. However, modern study of these romances draws attention to new details, allowing current readers to view medieval romances from a broader perspective, thus discovering fascinating aspects of their stories.

In this regard, *Roman van Walewein*, a Middle Dutch Arthurian romance, the plot of which is based on a quest to retrieve a flying chessboard, draws the reader's attention to the recurring theme of crossing a river. Three rivers, which the hero faces in the course

[1] F. van Oostrom, *Stemmen op schrift. Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur vanaf het begin tot 1300*, Amsterdam 2016, pp. 280–281, https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/oost033stem02_01/index.php [accessed: 6.08.2025].

[2] *Ibidem*, pp. 260–261.

of the story, function as obstacles that the knight has to overcome in order to resume his quest and eventually to bring it successfully to a conclusion. Interestingly, all of the three precarious confrontations with turbulent, deep water additionally involve a multitude of diverse aspects that give deeper meaning to the challenge of crossing the river. The attempt to overcome an obstacle, which in this case is a river, is not only an act of heroism during which the knight risks his life by facing the menacing water. Every attempted crossing is multifaceted, involving secondary, underlying nuances and characteristics that can be interpreted as elements holding a specific value and meaning connected not only with the river but also both with the story and the protagonist.

Arthurian romances are characterised by a multitude of adventures faced by the protagonist, among others. Norris J. Lacy indicates that the theme of a dangerous crossing is one of the recurring motifs in Arthurian romances.[3] According to Lacy, knights, who act in accordance with a chivalric code, devoted to morality, God, their king, and to succouring the vulnerable, also venture on adventures with their own prestige in mind. An adventure undertaken is not only an endeavour perfecting a knight and putting his abilities and morality to the test, but it is also a means through which a knight can earn esteem that shows that such a knight is indeed heroic and able.[4] As Lacy writes, such adventures, which are shaped by conventional ideas, transpire over the course of most of the story. They do not only occur in castles and courts, but also in the seclusion of the wilderness. A knight comes upon an adventure incidentally. Adventures faced, seemingly distinct, are however interconnected by the same theme or idea, sharing certain underlying links or similarities. Moreover, they are in a way connected to the knight's goal, and are, thus, predetermined to appear. Adventures are usually a part of a quest, according to Lacy. As Lacy details, one of the main premises of the typical structure of a quest is the fact that a knight is expected incessantly and persistently to engage with all the challenges he is faced with, exhibiting his capabilities and resolution as a result. Quests, prompted by a specific motivation or an objective, can, thus, exhibit the knight's nature and

[3] N.J. Lacy, *The Typology of Arthurian Romance*, in: *The Legacy of Chrétien de Troyes. Volume I*, eds. N.J. Lacy, D. Kelly, K. Busby, Amsterdam 1987, pp. 52–54.

[4] *Ibidem*, p. 42.

attitude towards his task or verify the knight's skills, virtues, and strength of will by subjecting these to various trials.[5] Some recurring themes, characters, and episodes that appear in numerous romances, shaped by conventions, are recognisable and are presented in a way that is in alignment with the expectations of those familiar with the works of the genre. The knight's confrontation with an adventure and his success are, therefore, a given. However, the anticipated occurrences are sometimes altered in order defy expectations, eliciting a reaction or drawing attention to a specific section of a story. Frequently, this involves supernatural and unexplainable occurrences that play a part in certain romances.[6]

The motif of crossing a river is closely related to the presence and participation of animals. As the passages describing the crossing show, animals such as horses influence the process markedly, aiding the knight in the course of the action. The frequent use of this motif in *Roman van Walewein* raises the question as to whether it appears in a comparable way in other chivalric romances. As a general overview of Middle Dutch literature indicates, a river is an element that is, indeed, present in a number of Arthurian romances. The purpose of my discussion here is to consider the motif of crossing a river by a knight accompanied by animals in chivalric romances. I focus on the role of the animals that act as companions and guides. For the sake of consistency, I focus exclusively on the rivers appearing in Middle Dutch literature. In addition to the thirteenth-century original Middle Dutch Arthurian romance *Roman van Walewein*, I discuss the thirteenth-century *Lanceloet en het hert met de witte voet* (Lancelot and the White-footed Stag), which is presumably an adaptation of an unknown source.[7]

Considering the underlying adversarial relation between nature, with the river functioning as a treacherous obstacle, and the man determined to overcome it, the supporting role of animals is intriguing. A deeper insight into this bond and the way animals exert influence on it makes it possible to consider the medieval outlook on the natural world and the manner in which medieval storytellers

---

[5] *Ibidem*, pp. 43–45.

[6] *Ibidem*, pp. 49–51.

[7] B. Besamusca, *The Medieval Dutch Arthurian Material*, in: *The Arthur of the Germans: The Arthurian Legend in Medieval German and Dutch Literature,* eds. W.H. Jackson, S.A. Ranawake, Cardiff 2000, p. 209, https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/besa001medi01_01/index.php [accessed: 6.08.2025].

incorporate nature into their captivating stories. Given the fact that Arthurian romances are generally not associated with themes of nature, such a study of the rivers and animals, which is part of an ecocritical approach to literature, may demonstrate the underlying value that motifs of nature can add to stories typically focused on the numerous challenges faced by their gallant heroes.

Recent ecocritical studies of medieval literature are exceptionally valuable. Ecocritical ideas can serve as an inspiration, an incentive to expand one's view, making it possible to look at medieval literature from a new perspective. The ideas of Gillian Rudd encourage one to look deeper, beyond what is on the surface. As Rudd writes, ecocritical study can focus on the interpretation of those elements of medieval works that are not noticed or tend to get perceived as insignificant, even if the text analysed does not specifically pertain to the relationship between human beings and nature. By interpreting the way the nature is portrayed in a given text, an analysis attempts to not only look at the purpose of its use, but also to determine and reflect on the underlying connections and relations between humans and nature.[8] Moreover, Rudd emphasises the importance of looking at the role and the significance of nature appearing in the background, considering minor elements devoid of specific metaphorical or allegorical meaning.[9] Albrecht Classen points out that the current growing awareness of the difficult relationship between nature and humans can enhance the way a modern person understands medieval culture. Literature, in fact, mirrors the way the approach of humans to nature has evolved.[10] A look into the past outlook on the relationship between humans and nature can positively influence the way contemporary humans treat nature and think about it. Thus, Classen emphasises the way in which the relationship between humans and nature, specifically water, has shaped the world. At the same time, humans have also exerted an influence on nature. As Classen writes, ecocriticism can shine some light on the relationship between humans and water and its positive and negative aspects, *inter alia*, through

[8] G. Rudd, *Greenery. Ecocritical Readings of Late Medieval English Literature*, Manchester 2007, pp. 4–5.

[9] *Ibidem*, p. 11.

[10] A. Classen, *Water in Medieval Literature: An Ecocritical Reading*, Lanham 2018, p. vii.

an analysis of the literature and art that depict it.[11] According to Classen, the literature of the past serves as a medium conveying the way people faced difficulties, and thought about and interacted with water.[12] In this context, Classen emphasises how people of the past have always been aware of the fact that they could not control nature. Since the Middle Ages, people have been forced to face the hardships stemming from their relationship with water, like floods and drownings. In spite of a multitude of difficulties, people were, however, conscious of the fact that such a struggle with water was inevitable, as they could not exist without it.[13] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert show that the existence of the elements of earth, air, fire, and water has been present in the consciousness of philosophers, writers, and poets throughout the ages. Nowadays, elements are largely seen as resources and thought about in the context of ecological crisis or science. However, Cohen and Duckert write that the literature of old and past depictions of elements and of the tense relationship between the human and the non-human can serve as a stimulus to rethink modern ecology, oppose the current exploitative treatment of the elements, and introduce a just and an attentive approach to them. As Cohen and Duckert state, humans have forgotten that elements, transformed into convenient resources that can be used, are, in fact, dangerous, powerful, and autonomous. The past, when nature was, in contrast, a force that was menacing and potent but could also be an unexpected companion, can, therefore, serve as a lesson from which people can devise new approaches to ecology and shape a relationship between humans and nature anew.[14]

In the following analysis of the motif of the river in medieval Arthurian romances, ecocriticism is therefore understood as a study of the relationship between humans and nature. Considering the subject of the article, the ecocritical perspective considered in this article prioritises the medieval outlook on the character of this relationship. As a result, the narrative analysis of the river crossings is based on the notion that water, in particular, was present

---

[11] *Ibidem*, pp. ix–x.

[12] *Ibidem*, pp. x–xi.

[13] *Ibidem*, pp. xii–xiii.

[14] J.J. Cohen, L. Duckert, *Introduction. Eleven Principles of the Elements*, in: *Elemental Ecocriticism: Thinking with Earth, Air, Water, and Fire*, eds. J.J. Cohen, L. Duckert, Minneapolis 2015, pp. 3–5.

in contemporary consciousness and was considered to be a dangerous, independent force of nature that people of the past had to face, regard, and interact with. In this respect, the premise that the past form of the relationship between the human and non-human is mirrored in the literature of the past is adopted.

The narrative analysis conducted in this article attempts, therefore, to show that the medieval understanding of the relationship between humans and nature shaped the way it is portrayed in the chivalric romances under discussion. Considering the traditional structure of chivalric romances, the precarious challenge of the river crossing, imposed on the protagonists with the purpose of hindering their quest, mirrors the way medieval people perceived the danger of interacting with water. Moreover, the fictional crossings are strongly connected with the presence of animals, whose profound relationship with humans serves the purpose of aiding the protagonists in reaching the other side of the river. In order to examine this curious relationship between humans and nature present in chivalric romances, my discussion studies how rivers are described, how the crossing is approached, how it unfolds and concludes, what role the animals play in the story, and how the relationship between the animals and the protagonists affects the river crossing.

Animals supporting the river crossing

The material chosen in order to explore the motif of crossing a river consists of two thirteenth-century Middle Dutch Arthurian romances, *Roman van Walewein* and *Lanceloet en het hert met de witte voet*. In these romances, rivers function as obstacles that impede the quests that the protagonists have undertaken and pose a considerable threat to the hero. Every attempted crossing is additionally accompanied by the animals that take part in and influence its progress. I present the way the animals take part in the crossing, the influence they exercise on the crossing, their attitude towards the rivers, and the effect the aforementioned aspects have on the plot and the protagonist. My analysis consists of three parts, each focusing on a specific animal appearing in the romances. Analysis shows that the animals that play a major role in crossing the rivers are primarily horses, which carry the riders

through the water on their backs. In addition to horses, the crossings discussed are influenced by a fox and a dog, which help the knights by other means.

Horses

Horses are irreplaceable participants in the quest. Trusted animals are not only used as knights' means of transport, helping them traverse the world, but as the confrontations with rivers prove, horses are invaluable when it comes to facing danger in a situation where a human's strength and abilities are limited and insufficient. Even though scholarly literature examines the role of the horses in medieval works, including Arthurian romances, the significance of horses in crossing rivers as obstacles is not acknowledged or extensively discussed. Nonetheless, Jelmar Hugen recognises the horse as an example of an animal helper in Arthurian literature. The appearance of such equine figures is not uncommon in Arthurian romances. In this regard, Hugen points out Walewein's connection to his horse Gringolet, explaining that such animal helpers can be associated with a particular, individual character from Arthurian legends.[15] Susan Crane argues that the relationship between a knight and a horse, one that is vital in chivalry, has two facets. The cooperation can be simultaneously seen as a "mechanism," a combination of entities and technology, and a "partnership" reflecting a set of shared virtues. According to Crane, the presence of a warhorse was vital to the identity of a knight. Such identity, formed by accomplishing feats worthy of honour, was attained by use of a knight's arms and a warhorse.[16] Knighthood brought about novelties and improvements in the field of equipment and methods of fighting involving horses. By influencing the knight's fighting capabilities, a horse simultaneously determined the knight's high status. Horses were considered to be noble animals as they were used by noblemen and knights. Crane emphasises the highest estimation and position of a warhorse, one solely

[15] J. Hugen, *Roges, Reynaert en de sprookjestraditie. Maartje Draak revisited*, "Spiegel der Letteren" 2017, vol. 59, no. 4, p. 460, https://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/387569 [accessed: 6.08.2025].

[16] S. Crane, *Animal Encounters: Contacts and Concepts in Medieval Britain*, Philadelphia 2013, pp. 137–138.

used in chivalric combat, among horses.[17] However, horses did not only constitute a part of the knight's equipment, a resource improving the knight's prowess. Horses were seen as partners. They were, therefore, not only of use to the knights but also mirrored their traits and virtues.[18] Furthermore, Crane points out the way in which a knight's equipment simultaneously mirrored and improved elements of human bodies. In the same way, warhorses could act in unison with humans, refining their actions.[19] Crane writes further about past acknowledgements of the fact that horses display a certain sense of perception and awareness. In this way, horses could either act independently or by mirroring or depending on the knight's actions.[20] Medieval works represent a sentiment that horses and knights had a connection of body and mind, thus being able to understand each other.[21]

The two first river crossings depicted in *Roman van Walewein* and Lancelot's attempt to cross the river in *Lanceloet en het hert met de witte voet* bear a striking resemblance to each other; they follow a similar pattern. The crossings featuring horses begin with the knight being stopped by an obstacle. The protagonist subsequently recognises the need to undertake the perilous crossing and proceeds to turn his horse towards the river in order to cross the water on horseback. The crossing is then concluded with a brief pause that takes place on the grassy river bank, during which the protagonist and the animal dry themselves off and the knight fixes and adjusts their equipment. The safety of the river bank, in contrast to the river itself, allows the knight and his steed to rest after the hardships of the crossing. Such a period of respite simultaneously allows the protagonist and the horse to prepare to face the coming challenges of the adventure. It is only after such a pause that the knight mounts his horse and resumes his journey.

The first confrontation with the river in *Roman van Walewein* takes place quite early in the story. The quest for the flying chessboard leaves King Arthur's knight Walewein stranded on a mountain inhabited by dragons. Having survived a strenuous battle with these monsters, the wounded knight finds himself

[17] *Ibidem*, pp. 139–141.
[18] *Ibidem*, p. 143.
[19] *Ibidem*, pp. 144–145.
[20] *Ibidem*, pp. 152–154.
[21] *Ibidem*, pp. 156–158.

trapped on the top of the mountain. As a result of the fight, the knight has not only lost his sword and shield, but also his beloved horse has fled to safety. As J.H. Winkelman notices, the missing pieces of equipment and the missing horse are the attributes associated with knighthood. The arduous confrontation with monsters deprives Walewein of them, rendering the knight vulnerable, and introducing a moment of distress.[22] However, the unexpected reunion of the hero with his beloved animal companion brings momentary relief. Trying to assess his predicament, Walewein notices an obstacle he will soon have to face. The mountain is surrounded by a deep, wide, and turbulent river. It is impossible to come down from the top of it without having to jump down into the raging water. Walewein comes to the realisation that he can either risk his life by crossing the river in order to try to save himself or face inevitable death on the mountain.

The river poses a considerable threat but it also is presented as the only way out.[23] The confrontation with an obstacle is simultaneously danger and salvation. At the same time, the knight is aware of the fact that an attempt to cross the river will be an honourable deed, one worthy of a knight. A possible death will demonstrate his fate and prove that he is a valiant knight who has perished trying to do what is right. Nevertheless, the prospect of jumping into the river frightens Walewein:

> Dus stont hi in groten vare
> Bi Gringolette sinen wrene
> Ende gordene ende sat daer up allene.
> Hi seindem achter ende voren.
> Ende Gringolet hevet vercoren

[22] J.H. Winkelman, *Intertekstualiteit als probleem*, "Queeste. Tijdschrift over middeleeuwse letterkunde in de Nederlanden" 1994, vol. 1, no. 1, p. 92, https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/_que002199401_01/_que002199401_01_0009.php [accessed: 6.08.2025].

[23] Duinhoven notices a link between this river and the purgatorial river that appears later in the story. As both rivers seem to lead the protagonist to castles located on the other side of both rivers, Duinhoven brings up the possibility of these two rivers being the same river. There is however no clear indication of this in the text. A.M. Duinhoven, *De voorgeschiedenis van Walewein*, "Voortgang. Jaarboek voor de Neerlandistiek XXII" 2004, vol. 22, p. 81, https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/_voo004200401_01/_voo004200401_01_0003.php [accessed: 6.08.2025].

Die riviere ende spranc daer neder.
Boven ne keerde si nemmeer weder![24]
(*Roman van Walewein*, ll. 704–710).[25]

Walewein, engulfed in fear, stands by Gringolet's side bracing himself for the jump into the unknown river. When he finally saddles his horse, the animal faces the river and jumps off into the water leaving no way of turning back:

Het was een deel nader noene
Als hi dus voer in die riviere
Ende Gringolet ghinc zwemmen sciere.
(*Roman van Walewein*, ll. 718–720).[26]

The plunge into the river is then followed by a thorough description of the crossing with a clear focus on the horse and its role in the process. The knight holds on to the horse, sits on its back, while the animal begins to swim swiftly. The verb used "zwemmen" (to swim) indicates that the horse performs this action consciously. The horse does not just let itself move passively with the current, but uses its own strength to reach the bank. Nevertheless, the struggle with the boisterous, deep water is exhausting:

Ende Gringolet dat wert so moede
Van zwemmene dat nemmeer ne mochte.
Doch swamt dat het lant gherochte
Metten voeten ende stont al stille
Om dat hem rusten wille
In gone riviere up een eylant.
(*Roman van Walewein*, ll. 726–731).[27]

---

[24] All the following citations and the corresponding English translations in the footnotes are taken from the edition of *Roman van Walewein* edited by David F. Johnson and Geert H.M. Claassens, published in 2000 by D.S. Brewer. See: *Dutch Romances I: Roman van Walewein*, eds. D.F. Johnson, G.H.M. Claassens, Cambridge 2000.

[25] And so he stood fearfully by his horse Gringolet, tightened his saddle-belt and mounted in a bound. He crossed himself profusely; Gringolet made for the river and jumped into the abyss below. Never again did they return to that height, of that you may be certain!

[26] It was shortly after nones when they leapt into the river and Gringolet began to swim.

[27] Gringolet was so exhausted from swimming that he could not go on. Nevertheless he swam until he felt land beneath his feet; he stood still in order to catch

As the crossing continues, the horse weakens. Overcoming the depth and strength of the current requires much exertion. It seems as if the horse cannot keep up much longer, but despite the growing difficulties, the indomitable Gringolet carries on until it reaches a place where it can stand on the bottom of the river. In spite of the fact that the horse is still deep in the rushing water, the shallower part of the river offers a moment of needed rest. The steed keeps still for a while in order to regain its strength before resuming the struggle with water and reaching the safety of the river bank. The exhaustion and the effort put into the dangerous crossing visibly take their toll as Gringolet lies lifeless on the grass:

> Dat sceen an Gringoletten wel
> Die lach als of hi ware doot.
> Dies was Waleweins rouwe groot.
> Hi trac dat gras uter aerde
> Ende ghinc tote sinen paerde.
> Hi begonst torken ende wriven,
> Proeven oft hem mochte bliven.
> Doe spranct up, dies was hi blide,
> Walewein, ende stint bi zire zide.
> (*Roman van Walewein*, ll. 744–752).[28]

Walewein, distressed and concerned about the well-being of his dear animal, makes an immediate attempt to bring the animal round. Only after the two have rested enough, Walewein examines his horse's equipment and mounts the animal. A momentary fear for his beloved animal and the prospect of losing a trusty companion become a moment in which Walewein comes to realise the importance of his horse. Even though he has nothing to defend himself with, he can still rely on Gringolet, which has just carried him through the water to the safety.

The second confrontation with a river takes place during the task to find the princess Ysabele. It is then that Walewein comes to a river that is wide and deep. On the other side of the river,

---

his breath on an island in that river.

[28] This was readily seen on Gringolet: he lay there as if he were dead. This greatly disturbed Walewein; he pulled up some grass, strode over to his horse and began to curry and rub him, to see if he could keep him alive. Then he jumped up: at this Walewein was very happy, and he stood by his side.

Walewein spots the vicious Red Knight who rides on his horse carrying off a damsel he has abducted. The lot of the damsel is unbearable to the knight. As Walewein's distress suggests, it is his duty to save the woman. As a result, he cannot any longer let the situation unfold without his intervention. However, Walewein and the Red Knight are separated by a treacherous obstacle in the form of a deep river. Moreover, there is no ford or bridge that Walewein can use to reach the other side. Even though Walewein has a greater and seemingly more important task at hand, the knight does not hesitate. The protagonist decides take the risk of rushing into danger in order to help the woman in need:

> Mettien wierp hi omme tpert
> Ende keerde ter rivieren wert
> Al dat het ghelopen mochte.
> Ende Gringolet die bezochte
> Den hoever ende spranc in ter vaert
> Tote over die medewaert
> Vander rivieren ende hi zwam vort
> Over tote an tander boort.
> (*Roman van Walewein*, ll. 3735–3742).[29]

The knight turns his horse towards the water and spurs on the animal. Once again it is an animal the knight can rely on to cross the river. The horse speeds up and jumps right into the middle of the river. Having jumped into the deep water, the horse swims forward until it reaches the bank. This time the description is succinct, devoid of the details pertaining to the course of the crossing and omitting any mention of the difficulties or dangers faced by Walewein and his horse. As a result, it is unclear whether the second crossing is as arduous as the previous one. It is possible that the author consciously chooses to exclude the details concerning the hardships of the crossing for the sake of the length of the passage or deems them simply unnecessary. The pronounced brevity of the description may also suggest that the confrontation with the deep and wide river was a swift undertaking devoid of the hardships

[29] He suddenly turned his horse and headed for the river, as fast as he could ride. Gringolet found his footing on the bank and gave a mighty leap, landing over half-way across the river, and he swam on to the other bank.

faced during the first crossing. Moreover, the passage points out the fact that the horse manages to reach the middle of the wide river with one jump. Regardless of the interpretation, the knight does not immediately pursue the hostile knight:

> Doe bete Walewein die heere
> Ende droochde zijn paert met zinen ghere
> Ende beterde hem al dat hem daert.
> (*Roman van Walewein*, ll. 3743–3745).[30]

Even though it is not clearly stated if the attempt results in some kind of a physical or mental fatigue, yet again, the crossing is followed by the habitual moment of rest and preparation.

The last crossing of a river, a motif previously analysed in a number of studies, takes place without the direct involvement of Gringolet. Nevertheless, the horse accompanies the knight while he explores and examines a mysterious river, on the other side of which is located the castle that Walewein wishes to get into. For the first time in the story the knight decides to ride along the river in order to reach the end of it. By doing so, Walewein stumbles upon a strange bridge. A somewhat supernatural sighting turns out to be the next obstacle. A peculiarity of the bridge bewilders Walewein. In a moment of doubt, the knight expresses concern for his horse:

> […] Es dit die brugghe daer men vaert
> Over? Ic wane wel, mijn paert
> Hevet liever tswemmen na minen waen
> Dant dese brugghe soude over gaen: […]
> (*Roman van Walewein*, ll. 4965–4968).[31]

According to Walewein his beloved horse would rather swim across the river than go over the strange bridge. Whereas the mention of Gringolet seems like an affectionate display of unease regarding the safety of Walewein's animal companion, Winkelman sees it as an attempt to shift the blame for the inability of going over

[30] Then Sir Walewein dismounted, dried his horse with his cloak and adjusted all of his gear.

[31] […] is this the bridge over which one must cross? It seems to me my horse would rather swim over than cross here: […].

the bridge onto Gringolet.[32] In that way, the knight can justify his decision to forsake the dangerous endeavour of facing the bridge. Having deemed it impossible to use the bridge, Walewein decides to cross the river yet again on the back of his horse:

> Doe beti of mettesen dinghen
> Ende vergorde vaste zijn part
> Ende ghereedde hem ter vaert
> Over die riviere te varne.
> (*Roman van Walewein*, ll. 4970–4973)[33]

Holding on to his horse, Walewein approaches the river intending to cross it. But before doing so, for the first time in the story, the knight decides to assess the depth of the unknown river with his lance before crossing it. It quickly turns out that the seemingly clear surface of the river is treacherous and will burst into flames when touched. This unexpected phenomenon unsettles Walewein. The following passages focus on his growing struggles and doubts, detailing the extraordinary nature of the burning river. The hero in despair is repeatedly misled by the supernatural sight. Walewein struggles with growing doubts, trying to reason and rationalise in order to fathom the impossible reality. The burning river does not seem real. Walewein believes, therefore, that the burning water is some kind of daydream or trick, only to be confronted with real flames during multiple attempts to examine the river.

During one such desperate attempt, Gringolet almost dies in the burning water. The impossibility of using the bridge, confusion, and despair force Walewein to act recklessly. As Frits van Oostrom notices, the attitude of the knight during the confrontation with the burning river somewhat contradicts the typical premises of late Arthurian romances. Such romances are primarily focused on the portrayal of an ideal, exemplary knight overcoming obstacles, simultaneously omitting any personal struggles and development that are central to earlier, classic Arthurian romances. In order

---

[32] J.H.Winkelman, *Intertekstualiteit als probleem*, "Queeste. Tijdschrift over middeleeuwse letterkunde in de Nederlanden" 1994, vol. 1, no. 1, p. 91, https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/_que002199401_01/_que002199401_01_0009.php [accessed: 6.08.2025].

[33] At that he dismounted and, tightening his saddle girth, he prepared himself at once to ford the river.

to do so, the obstacles are most often extraordinary, supernatural. The vulnerability, contradicting the image of the perfect knight displayed by Walewein, is, thus, surprising.[34] The story driven by adventure is momentarily halted. Instead the passage focuses on an internal struggle fuelled by fear and doubt.

Walewein approaches the river in an attempt to examine it once again:

> Die blaexeme scoot also soe ere
> Hadde ghedaen neven den scacht!
> Ende Gringolet trac bet acht:
> Waersi also staende bleven
> Si adden bede verloren tleven
> Ende hadden verberndt altemale […]
> (*Roman van Walewein*, ll. 5080–5085).[35]

If it were not for Gringolet who manages to dodge the flame, both the horse and the knight would be consumed by fire. Walewein is forced to retreat and seek refuge in the enclosed garden where the speaking fox Roges resides. The unexpected encounter with a new companion brings Walewein a new prospect of crossing the river. As the future crossing will take place underground and precede the conquest of the castle where the princess Ysabele whom he seeks is held, Walewein is advised to leave Gringolet in the garden:

> Ju paerd dat moet hier achter bliven:
> Brochtijt daer, men sout ontliven. […]
> Latet hier int vrijthof gaen,
> Gringolet, ju goede paert.
> Sijt seker dies ende onvervaert,
> Ic saelt ju wel behouden, here.
> (*Roman van Walewein*, 6015–6023).[36]

---

[34] F. van Oostrom, *Stemmen op schrift*…, pp. 268–269.

[35] […] the flames shot up as they had done earlier upon his lance! But Gringolet pulled back: if they had remained standing there they would both have lost their lives and been burned entirely […].

[36] "Your horse, however, must stay here; if you took him with you, he would be slain […] let Gringolet, your good horse, graze here in the garden. Be sure of this and fear not, I shall guard him well for you, my lord."

The impossibility of the safe crossing caused by the supernatural nature of the river and the consequent dangers renders the horse's assistance impossible. Instead, Roges promised that Gringolet will be safely concealed inside the garden. As a result, the confrontation with the burning river is the only instance in the passages under discussion, where the horse is not involved in the river crossing. Instead, the safety of the trusted animal is put at the forefront.

Lanceloet en het hert met de witte voet recounts two crossings attempted by King Arthur's knights Lancelot and Keye. The two crossings of the same river are, however, contrasted with each other; they indicate major differences between two characters and their approaches to the quest to catch the stag with the white foot, the captor of which will be rewarded with the right to marry the queen. The river appears as the first obstacle on the way to find the mysterious deer, separating the area over which the animal rules from the rest of the world. As the story details, the deer with the white foot lives in a walled forest lying in a valley surrounded by mountains and is master of the surrounding lands, forest, and water.

Both Keye and Lancelot follow a white dog that knows a way to the deer. The first crossing is undertaken by Keye, who follows the animal guide on his horse until he is stopped by a wide and deep river. If the knight wants to reach the other side of it and find the deer with the white foot, he has to find a way to cross the river and get over the dangerously deep water:

> Die hont en sochte geen gewat
> Ende vloech over alse een vogel.
> Keye kerde ombe den togel
> Ende reet weder thusward.[37]
> (*Lanceloet en het hert met de witte voet*, ll. 104–107).[38]

As soon as the white dog jumps into the river and begins to swim, Keye decides to turn his horse around and head back. As Keye's

[37] All the following citations and the corresponding English translations put in the footnotes are taken from the edition of *Lanceloet en het hert met de witte voet* edited by David F. Johnson and Geert H.M. Claassens and published in 2003 by D.S. Brewer. See: *Dutch Romances III: Five Interpolated Romances from the Lancelot Compilation*, eds. D.F. Johnson, G.H.M. Claassens, Cambridge 2003.

[38] The dog did not look for a ford, but flew across like the wind. Keye turned his horse and rode back home again.

immediate reaction suggests, the prospect of facing a menacing obstacle fills him with fear. Despite the necessity of the crossing, the knight does not consider the possibility of taking the risk of jumping into the deeps of the river and of following the dog that has already started to swim to the other side. The horse that appears to influence considerably all the previously discussed crossings has no role to play in this passage. Even though the knight faces the river on horseback, he does not dare pluck up his courage, put trust in his animal, and rely on its strength and capabilities to reach the other bank. In spite of the conciseness of the passage, it is clear that the first obstacle in the form of a wide and deep river that the knight has to face overwhelms Keye and forces him to retreat and give up the quest, filling him with shame as a result.

The second attempt however, undertaken by the brave Lancelot results in a successful crossing. As soon as the white dog guides Lancelot to the river, the animal jumps into the water. The brave knight does not hesitate and immediately follows the dog into the danger on horseback, relying on his steed:

> Doe volgede Lanceloet hem naer
> Ende gaf den orsse togels genoech;
> Genindelike hi in sloech
> Ende reet over dwater harde groet.
> (*Lanceloet en het hert met de witte voet*, ll. 166–169).[39]

The description of the crossing is concise. Lancelot spurs his horse and rushes into the deep and wide river without minding the danger, and subsequently rides through the water to the other side. In spite of the potential threat associated with water, Lancelot exhibits no signs of fear or doubt. Instead, the knight proves his valour by immediately springing into action and daring to guide his horse intending to charge into the deep water. The description of the crossing does not include any details concerning the difficulties faced by the horse or the knight. Instead, the passage exclusively focuses on recounting the fact that the horse manages to overcome the deep water and reach the other side of the river. Unlike the horses in the previously analysed passages that swim

[39] At that Lanceloet followed him and gave his horse free rein; he leapt in fearlessly and rode across those wide waters.

to the other side of the river, Lancelot's horse gallops through the water at great speed undeterred by its depth and width. The passage concludes then with the recurring element of a pause and preparation preceding the continuation of the adventure:

> Doe soe beette Lanceloet
> Neder in dat grone gras
> Ende beide dat hi droge was,
> Hi ende sijn ors oec beide.
> Doe verleidi sijn gereide
> Ende sat op al onvervard […]
> (*Lanceloet en het hert met de witte voet*, ll. 170–175).[40]

The fox

As the beneficial companionship of horses demonstrates, animals can directly and actively influence the course of the crossing by carrying the knight to the other side of the river, battling the water with their own strength and resolve. The knights are, however, not only aided by horses, especially when confronted with deadly dangers that are seemingly impossible to overcome. The enchanted fox that appears in *Roman van Walewein* during the confrontation with the burning river proves to be an invaluable companion that offers advice and guidance that Walewein desperately need in that dire moment.

The role of the fox Roges is extensively discussed by scholars of Middle Dutch romance. Hugen states that the speaking fox is a character completely unique to *Roman van Walewein*.[41] Even though magical beings appear in Arthurian romances, no other text includes an animal helper in the form of a speaking fox.[42] Scholars generally presume that Roges is a character originating from a fairy tale.[43] Maartje Draak was the first to associate *Roman van Walewein* with the fairy tale type that is exemplified by "Der goldene

[40] After that Lanceloet dismounted onto the green grass and waited until he was dry, he and his horse both. Then he adjusted his saddle and mounted boldly […].

[41] J. Hugen, Roges, *Reynaert en de sprookjestraditie. Maartje Draak revisited*, "Spiegel der Letteren" 2017, vol. 59, no. 4, p. 453, https://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/387569 [accessed: 6.08.2025].

[42] *Ibidem*, p. 460.

[43] *Ibidem*, p. 453.

Vogel" of the Brothers Grimm.[44] As Hugen remarks, it was Draak who pointed out that Roges shows certain similarities with the figure of the animal helper, the enchanted speaking fox present in texts of the fairy tale type ATU 550,[45] in which the fox plays an important part, accompanying, advising, and aiding the protagonist during his journey; ultimately the hero saves the fox from the enchantment that keeps it in animal form.[46] However, Hugen points out the visibly diminished role of Roges in *Roman van Walewein*. The fox provides help only once in the course of the story by showing Walewein the underground tunnel. Even though the fox accompanies Walewein in other adventures, his significance as a whole is minimal.[47] Moreover, as J.H.M. Taylor notices, the fox usually makes no actual use of its ability to speak, instead trying to communicate as an animal.[48] Draak points out that the role of the fox in *Roman van Walewein* is limited because Walewein is presented as an ideal knight who cannot depend on a helper.[49] As Hugen explains, Draak justifies the minor relevance of Roges by the fact that Walewein, who is the actual hero of the romance central to the story, could not be sidelined in favour of a secondary animal helper.[50] Nevertheless, Roges' major role in crossing the burning river is undeniable. The unexpected appearance of the figure of the helpful fox succeeds in introducing a plot point by offering the protagonist a solution to an unsolvable problem.

The burning river turns out to be a breaking point during Walewein's quest in *Roman van Walewein*, prompting the knight to wallow in despair, question reality, and consider abandoning an attempt to cross the river. An unexpected encounter with the speaking fox

---

[44] M. Draak, *Onderzoekingen over de Roman van Walewein*, Haarlem 1936, p. 1, https://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/322559 [accessed: 6.08.2025].

[45] A system classifying folktale types created by Aarne and revised and expanded by Thompson and Uther. ATU number 550 refers to the folktale type corresponding to the Bird, Horse and Princess or Search for the Golden Bird: H-J. Uther, *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography. Part I. Animal Tales, Tales of Magic, Religious Tales, and Realistic Tales, with an Introduction*, Helsinki 2011, pp. 318–319, https://edition.fi/kalevalaseura/catalog/book/763 [accessed: 6.08.2025].

[46] J. Hugen, *Roges, Reynaert en de sprookjestraditie*…, p. 454.

[47] *Ibidem*, p. 458.

[48] J.H.M. Taylor, *The Roman van Walewein: Man into Fox, Fox into Man*, in: *Arthurian Literature XVII: Originality and Tradition in the Middle Dutch Roman van Walewein*, eds. B. Besamusca, K. Busby, E. Kooper, Cambridge 1999, p. 134.

[49] M. Draak, *Onderzoekingen over de Roman*…, p. 75.

[50] J. Hugen, *Roges, Reynaert en de sprookjestraditie*…, p. 458.

named Roges, however, turns the course of events around. A strange speaking fox encountered in the garden, where Walewein and his horse take refuge, is, in fact, the enchanted son of a king. The fox is master of this place and lives there in solitude. As Roges reveals, he had hoped that he would one day meet the famous knight Walewein, as he believes the knight would be able to solve his problem and help him regain human form. Roges possesses considerable knowledge about the mysterious burning river that Walewein cannot fathom. It is the fox who informs the knight of the nature of the burning river. When asked, Roges explains to Walewein that the river is actually a kind of purgatory, in which souls in the form of black birds can be cleansed and absolved from sins. Only then can the purified, sinless, white souls go over the bridge above the river in order to reach heaven. As the further description of the fox indicates, it is moreover impossible to cross the river in any other place. The river begins in hell and flows into the *Liver Sea*, a *mare coagulatum*, where water is thick and impenetrable.[51]

This freshly acquired knowledge and the impossibility of crossing the river fill Walewein with sadness and anger. Once Roges confirms Walewein's doubts and argues against his plan to take the castle, the knight expresses a newfound confidence. As Ad Putter indicates, such confidence is articulated by Walewein by a metaphorical readiness to "cross hell"; this implies the urgency of the sacrifice the knight is ready to make in order to pass the treacherous obstacle. Thanks to the presence of the fox, however, hell, which manifests itself as a burning river, does not need to be crossed.[52] The fox immediately expresses his eagerness to help:

> Die vos sprac: "Here, es dat waer?
> Doet danne dat ic ju sal raden.
> Ic sal u helpen ende staen in staden
> Dat ghi sult liden die riviere."
> (*Roman van Walewein*, ll. 6004–6007).[53]

---

[51] A. Putter, *Walewein in the Otherworld and the Land of Prester John*, in: *Arthurian Literature XVII: Originality and Tradition in the Middle Dutch Roman van Walewein*, eds. B. Besamusca, K. Busby, E. Kooper, Cambridge 1999, pp. 87–88, https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/putt011wale01_01/index.php [accessed: 6.08.2025].

[52] *Ibidem*, p. 91.

[53] The fox spoke, "My lord, is this so? Then do as I shall advise you. I shall help you and stand by you so that you may cross that river."

Roges asks Walewein to follow his advice and promises to help the knight cross the river. As he assures him, they will soon be on the other side and the fox will lead the knight to the castle he wants to reach. As the knight declares, Roges' confidence and promise of help will surely fill Walewein with gratitude, provided the fox's promises are true. Once again, Roges encourages Walewein to follow him and assures the knight that this will not bring him any harm.

Walewein then follows the fox to the place by the river where Roges opens a hidden door placed on the ground and encourages Walewein to enter the opening, which leads underground. Nevertheless, it is clear that the knight is still mistrustful of the fox, expecting the mysterious character to betray him. Contrary to the common assumptions regarding the origin of Roges, Hugen points out the possible relation between him and the anthropomorphic fox Reynaert in the Middle Dutch *Van den vos Reynaerde*.[54] Reynaert's sly nature, which is generally viewed in a negative light, corresponds to the negative image of the fox painted by fables, the Bible, or ancient and medieval encyclopaedic works and bestiaries, according to which the fox is associated with trickery and devilishness. As Hugen points out, the figure of the fox and its appearance in *Roman van Walewein* is repeatedly connected with the devil. Moreover, in the first passage in which Roges appears, the fox attempts to destroy Walewein's armour and steal his horse.[55] As a result of this, the knight's mistrust of the fox seems well-founded. Taylor sees the presence of a talking fox associated with trickery unfavourable, as it collides with heroic Walewein. As Taylor writes, the relationship between the two characters could be interpreted as a sort of cooperation in deception, in a scheme.[56] Hugen argues, however, that the collaboration can be indeed seen this way because the fox helps Walewein get inside the castle so that the knight can reach the princess he seeks.[57] Similarities between Reynaert and Roges indicate intertextuality, a relation between the two works. Both chivalric romances and beast epics influenced each

[54] *Van den vos Reynaerde* is a satirical Middle Dutch beast epic in which anthropomorphic animals, including the title character, the sly fox Reynaert, are central to the story.

[55] J. Hugen, *Roges, Reynaert en de sprookjestraditie*…, pp. 463–466.

[56] J.H.M. Taylor, *The Roman van Walewein: Man into Fox, Fox into Man*…, p. 141.

[57] J. Hugen, *Roges, Reynaert en de sprookjestraditie*…, p. 465.

other, according to Hugen.[58] Undeniably, Roges' cunning nature turns out to be an instrumental factor in getting to the other side of the burning river:

> "Mi dinct dat ic verraden bin,"
> Sprac Walewein, "van ju, geselle!"
> (*Roman van Walewein*, ll. 6048–6049).[59]

The fox declares once again that his intentions are pure, motivated by the hope that Walewein would be able to find a way out of his predicament. At the same time Roges reminds Walewein of his goal. If the knight wants to cross the burning river he will have to follow the fox, who explains that the only way to reach the other side is to go through the underground passage. Moreover, the existence of the passage through which the fox leads Walewein has been thus far shrouded in mystery. The fox however appears to be the only character aware of its presence. An unexpected encounter with Roges and the fact that the fox possesses knowledge about the mysterious passage change the course of the story significantly, bringing a solution to an impasse, a seemingly unsolvable problem involving an other-worldly realm. However, the knight is still doubtful. Even though Roges expresses his wish to help Walewein and leads him to the passage, the knight still fears that the fox wants to betray him. Nevertheless, Walewein is determined to achieve his goal and to find the damsel located in the castle on the other side of the river. As a result, the knight follows the fox underground:

> […] Die den wech wel wiste
> Dat was die vos: hi ghinc ter cure
> Tote hi ten ende quam al dure
> Daer si buten souden gaen.
> (*Roman van Walewein*, 6086–6089).[60]

---

[58] *Ibidem*, pp. 466–467.

[59] "It seems to me you've betrayed me," said Walewein, "my friend!"

[60] […] The fox was the one who knew the way: he went straight ahead until they reached the opening at the other end through which they would pass into the open air.

As the narrator indicates, the fox knows the way underground well and leads Walewein to the door leading outside to the other side of the river. In contrast to the nature of the river and all the dangers surrounding it, Roges leads Walewein effortlessly underground. Together they manage to achieve something that is seemingly impossible.

Jozef D. Janssens points out yet another dimension of the role that the speaking fox has in facing the mysterious river. Janssens argues that the burning river and the bridge above it have evident eschatological connotations. This is why the knight cannot cross the river. Walewein is not supposed to enter the otherworld. Through elements like purgatory and the bridge intended for souls, the author means to introduce the realm of the otherworld, one that strongly contrasts with the world of King Arthur's knights.[61] As Putter explains, authors of medieval romances often strive to make the worlds portrayed seem wondrous through references to the otherworld. The authors of *Roman van Walewein* do not resort to metaphors however. Instead, the elements of the otherworld are made an actual part of the chivalric world.[62] Walewein is, therefore, according to Janssens, forced to face supernatural phenomena that are employed in order to hinder and confound the heroic knight. As a consequence the knight cannot solely rely on his own prowess. In order to solve the impasse stemming from the inaccessible otherworldly realms connected to the river, Penninc, the author of *Roman van Walewein*, introduces an animal guide derived from a folktale. As Janssens puts it, in order to be able to face the other-worldly obstacles Walewein had to turn to supernatural companions like the speaking fox Roges.[63]

Walewein's confrontation with the purgatorial river can, however, be considered to be ironic, as Winkelman indicates.[64]

---

[61] J.D. Janssens, *Tekstinterpretatie via een onderzoek van de co- en intertekstuele relaties in de Roman van Walewein*, "Spiegel der Letteren" 1982, vol. 24, no. 2, pp. 92–93, https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/_spi007198201_01/_spi007198201_01_0004.php [accessed: 6.08.2025].

[62] A. Putter, *Walewein in the Otherworld and the Land of Prester John*…, pp. 84–85.

[63] J.D. Janssens, *Tekstinterpretatie via een onderzoek van de co- en intertekstuele*…, pp. 92–93.

[64] J.H. Winkelman, *Intertekstualiteit als probleem*, "Queeste. Tijdschrift over middeleeuwse letterkunde in de Nederlanden" 1994, vol. 1, no. 1, p. 91, https://

Besamusca compares the appearance of the bridge and the use of the underground tunnel in *Roman van Walewein* with similar passages from the *Lancelot-Grail* during which Lancelot goes over the Sword Bridge and Gauvain faces the Underwater Bridge. Whereas the knights try to overcome the obstacles and they do so with much effort facing considerable difficulties on the way, Walewein, who is not meant to use the otherworldly bridge, ultimately does not go over it. Instead, the knight uses the underground tunnel without facing any difficulties. According to Besamusca, the contrast is meant to be ironic and mock the excessive danger and challenge posed by the obstacles from the *Lancelot-Grail*.[65] Winkelman argues, however, that it is the passage from *Roman van Walewein* that is ironic. Contrary to the heroic efforts of Lancelot and Gauvain, Walewein hesitates and does not dare to go over the bridge. Ironically, it is only with the help of the fox that the protagonist manages to reach the other side of the river. On top of that, the knight does so with striking ease, in contrast to Lancelot and Gauvain from the *Lancelot-Grail*. In that way, the difference between the knights is conspicuous, calling Walewein's knightly perfection into question.[66]

The white dog

The last animal that appears in the passages analysed here and that accompanies the protagonists while crossing the river, is a little white dog. Although the dog has no direct impact on the crossing itself, instead functioning as a companion directing the knights to the river, the animal has a crucial part in the story nonetheless. As Hugen notices, animal helpers and guides have a prominent role in Arthurian romances. The stories include not only the animals that are connected to a specific knight. Very often animal helpers appear as guides supporting the heroes in a particular story from a series of adventures. In this context, Hugen mentions the white

www.dbnl.org/tekst/_que002199401_01/_que002199401_01_0009.php [accessed: 6.08.2025].

[65] B. Besamusca, *Walewein, Moriaen en de Ridder metter mouwen: Intertekstualiteit in drie Middelnederlandse Arturromans*, Hilversum 1993, pp. 62–64.

[66] J.H. Winkelman, *Intertekstualiteit als problem*…, pp. 91–92.

dog guide that appears in the Middle Dutch *Lanceloet en het hert met de witte voet*, among other animal guides.[67]

The white dog in *Lanceloet en het hert met de witte voet* fulfils the role of a guide that is tasked with leading the knights to the deer with the white foot. The dog accompanies the queen's representative, who came to King Arthur's court to proclaim a quest in which the successful knight will be rewarded with the right to marry the queen. As the noblewoman informs King Arthur's court while setting out the quest, the white dog will guide the volunteer to the deer whose white foot was supposed to be obtained.

The dog has the ability to show anyone who dares to undertake the quest the right way to the forest where the deer was located. In this way, the dog can aid the willing knight in completing his quest as the dog has knowledge of the location of the elusive deer. As a result, both knights who undertake the quest to hunt the white deer and obtain its white foot are accompanied by the dog on their way to the goal of the quest. The way to the sought--after deer that the dog takes leads over a river. As a result, both attempts that take place in the romance include a confrontation with a river and the involvement of the dog in that confrontation.

Two passages describing the attempts clearly indicate that dog does not only act as a guide that is tasked with leading both knights to the deer. The dog takes an active part in the crossing. It is the white dog that is the first to jump into the river in order to cross it:

> Die hont en sochte geen gewat
> Ende vloech over alse een vogel.
> (*Lanceloet en het hert met de witte voet*, ll. 104–105).[68]

Having arrived at the river, the dog does not look for a place that was crossable. The dog's guidance does not offer easy solutions, but leads the knights to a dangerous obstacle that has to be overcome in order that they may be rewarded. The dangers posed by the river do not affect the dog in any way however. Instead, the dog jumps into the deep water and begins to swim to the other side of the river effortlessly. Describing the movements of the dog, the narrator compares it with the wind. The dog moves in the deep water swiftly,

---

[67] J. Hugen, *Roges, Reynaert en de sprookjestraditie...*, pp. 460–461.

[68] The dog did not look for a ford, but flew across like the wind.

with ease. Unlike Keye who does not dare to follow his guide and stays on the bank of the river, the dog keeps on swimming:

> Dat hondekin swam onvervard
> Weder over dwater wijt.
> (*Lanceloet en het hert met de witte voet*, ll. 108–109).[69]

The dog is undeterred and unaffected by the dangers of the deep water. The animal guide easily manages to traverse the deep water without showing any signs of weariness or struggle. Oblivious to the hesitations of Keye, the dog swims over the wide river until it turns around having noticed the absence of the knight who was supposed to follow him.

There is a conflict between the guide and the knight. Keye, who had already decided that he would not face the danger of crossing the river, realises that the company of the dog on his return would discredit him in the eyes of King Arthur's court. In order to cover up his shameful retreat, for a brief moment the knight considers killing the dog with his sword. Instead Keye chooses to save face by devising a believable excuse, allowing the next knight to try the hunt the deer with the white foot. During the second crossing, the dog guiding Lancelot does not hesitate either:

> Doe sach hi dat hondekin sciere
> Int water spranc oppenbaer.
> Doe volgede Lanceloet hem naer […]
> (*Lanceloet en het hert met de witte voet*, ll. 164–166).[70]

Lancelot follows the dog with a great speed until they arrive at the river. Having arrived at the river Lancelot watches as the dog immediately jumped into the water. As soon as the dog attempts the crossing Lancelot follows his guide into the deep river without giving it a single thought. The ease with which Lancelot rushes into the water can be interpreted as the knight's putting complete trust in his guide and, just like the dog, crossing the river without

---

[69] The little dog swam resolutely back over the wide water.

[70] Then he saw how the dog jumped immediately into the water. At that Lanceloet followed him […].

doubt or fear. By doing so, Lancelot mirrors the steadfastness and certainty displayed by his guide.

The little white dog that has the role of a guide and the motif of crossing the river also appear in the French *Lai de Tyolet*, which is related to the Middle Dutch text and most likely originates from the same source.[71] As Draak points out, both of these shared elements of the two stories are, however, not common in any folktales that could potentially inspire the construction of the plot.[72] Nevertheless, both passages can be to some degree associated with the motif of the Otherworld present in Celtic legends. As Ludo Jongen and Paul Verhuyck point out, a white animal, such as a white deer, would lead person to the Otherworld, likely the realm of the dead. The animal that is usually considered to be a fairy and with whom a man led to the Otherworld could fall in love is said to be frequently encountered by water.[73] Perhaps the white dog could be seen as such figure, tasked with leading the knight to the mysterious, secluded area where the sought-after deer's foot can guarantee the knight the queen's love.

Conclusions

Even though river crossings are not central to the texts discussed here, instead constituting a part of a bigger series of engrossing episodes, confrontations with rivers are vital to the continuity of the knights' quests. Every river crossing analysed is of great importance as the fluid obstacles need to be overcome in order to continue the heroic quests narrated in both romances. Chivalric romances, being an embodiment of captivating adventures, are driven by perilous trials. Such trials, like those in the form of a river crossing, can be seen as a reflection of a previous period's approach

[71] Studies regarding the relationship between two texts are available. An article by Geert S. Pallemans can shine more light on differences between two texts: G.S. Pallemans, *Revisiting the Old French Lai de Tyolet in light of the Middle Dutch Lancelot Compilation and Lancelot en het Hert met de witte voet*, "Neophilologus" 2007, vol. 91, pp. 351–360.

[72] M. Draak, *Inleiding*, in: *Lanceloet en het hert met de witte voet*, ed. M. Draak, Leiden 1984, pp. 16–17, https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/_lan003lanc01_01/index.php [accessed: 6.08.2025].

[73] L. Jongen, P. Verhuyck, *De achterkant van de Ronde Tafel. De anonieme Oudfranse lais uit de 12e en 13e eeuw*, Deventer 1985, p. 113.

to surrounding nature. The danger generated in the confrontations with the river are likely to be inspired by how those interactions of people of the past with water, specifically rivers, looked like. What people of the past thought of rivers and saw as a challenge in their inextricable interactions with water rushing in the surrounding streams is, therefore, employed by the authors of the stories and presented as a challenge that the chivalric protagonist had to face. The rivers present in the examples discussed here are an epitome of the unrestrained, menacing forces of nature that Cohen and Duckert speak of. The descriptions in the texts that I discuss paint a picture of deep and wide rivers. In one passage, the body of water is specified as stream of turbulent, rushing water. Moreover, the rivers are unaltered by human activity, offering no fords or bridges. Elsewhere, a seemingly calm river functions as a vessel for the inexplicable otherworldly dimension as it takes the form of the supernatural, preposterous phenomenon of burning water. In this case, nature bears a specified, eschatological meaning. Rivers appear on the heroes' way unexpectedly, forming obstacles holding the gallant protagonists back from continuing their quests. The rivers, which must be crossed, challenge the knights to show a rightful tenacity and to embrace the risk by daring to plunge into the unknown and to traverse dangerous water. A struggle against wide, rushing streams of deep water must, therefore, be seen as an act of bravery, an endeavour worthy of those daring knights' efforts and a perilous challenge suitable as part of the string of thrilling adventures that forms a quest, which is central to the plot of a romance. Every encounter with the volatile force of water serves as a trial meant to put knightly courage and prowess to the test, daring the heroes to face the water in spite of undeniable peril. I have shown that a direct confrontation with a deep stream, the element of water in unrestrained form, fills even the bravest of knights with dread and uncertainty. But the confrontations with rivers described are not only dangerous, but also arduous. Deep, rushing water can submerge, suffocate, or slow down. Moving in the depths of turbulent water can challenge the knights and the horses carrying them on their backs. A striking contrast between respite in the safety of a river bank and the danger of a stream of water emphasises the threat and the struggle linked to the river's nature. In this way, the river crossings in the texts discussed simultaneously display an awareness of the danger of interacting with water

and a certain respect for its power. Rivers represent forces of nature that are independent, feared, and regarded. However, this presence of nature in chivalric romances is inextricably linked with the presence of human beings. The rivers that, because of their perilous character, act as obstacles, need to be faced and overcome by the protagonists. The relationship between man and river is, therefore, adversarial, considering that a knight must oppose nature in order to continue his valiant quest and bring it to a successful conclusion. It is nature, however, that is the dominating force. It is man who must be so bold as to stand up to water and to be simultaneously wary of its force and the danger it poses.

Moreover, the river crossings depicted in *Roman van Walewein* and *Lanceloet en het hert met de witte voet* display how deeply rooted the relationship between humans and animals is in the consciousness of medieval authors and storytellers. Animals that take part in the confrontations with the dangerous rivers act both as guides and companions deeply connected to the stories and their human characters.

In particular, the horse is presented as the knight's trustiest companion. Horses are regarded as an intrinsic symbol of the knighthood. The presence of the horse for the duration of the adventure is both undisputed and imperative. The adventures discussed here unfold with the knight facing looming obstacles on his horse's back. Furthermore, the knights clearly hold their animal companion in high regard. The importance of the animal companion becomes particularly visible in *Roman van Walewein*. The stranded Walewein grieves for his temporary separation from his horse. The loss of the horse is part of a specific state of distress that the knight experiences. Furthermore, Walewein is conscious of the importance of the animal and expresses despair when it lies lifeless in the grass. As both horse and its owner are repeatedly faced with the obstacles and underlying, unthinkable dangers of the quest, the knight repeatedly expresses concern for the well-being of his dear animal. The only moment when the horse does not take part in the crossing is justified with a need to keep the horse safe. At the conclusion of each crossing, the knight specifically devotes time to letting his horse rest and dry off; and he makes sure the animal's equipment is properly set up. Every danger and experience of exhaustion the horse and the protagonists face is compensated for by a respite guaranteed by the safety of the river bank, out of the reach of the deadly water.

Furthermore, a river crossing appears to be a joint effort. The protagonists are, in fact, not physically capable of reaching the other side of the deep rivers by themselves. Neither can they leave their horses behind, considering how deeply rooted their presence is in the story and how profound the relationship is between them and their steeds. Whereas the knight has to pluck up his courage, in order to dare to venture into the dangerous water and turn his horse towards the river, it is the horse that consciously uses its physical strength, persistence, and abilities to bring the knight to the other side of it by swimming or galloping through deep water. As the crossings that I discuss prove, the protagonists can always rely on their horses, which are prepared to exert themselves in spite of the lurking danger posed by deep, wide rivers. The horses traverse the depths of the deadly streams in spite of the exhaustion or danger those streams cause and pose. The animal companions, steered by the knights, do not show hesitancy and never let their masters down, obeying the riders' directions. As a result, the horses are invaluable when it comes to facing the challenges and treacherous obstacles posed by the quest. Horses that repeatedly overcome the obstacles display commendable courage, tenacity, and strength by carrying the knights on their backs to the safety of the other side of the river. In doing so, horses are instrumental in bringing the quests undertaken by the protagonists to an end. By aiding the knight in traversing unknown lands and overcoming obstacles in such way, horses exert a significant influence on the process of the quest, contributing as a result to the successful conclusion of the adventure.

By the same token, the presence of animal guides in the shape of a dog and a fox positively influences the course of the stories. Both animals possess very specific knowledge. While the white dog knows where the deer with the white foot can be found, the fox sets out the nature of the inexplicable river. The white dog primarily functions as a device to lead the knights to the mysterious location of the deer. The animal helper facilitates the first part of the quest, allowing the knights to avoid a laborious search for the mysterious deer. In the process of doing so, the white dog guides both knights and leads them to the river. The enchanted fox does not lead Walewein to the river, but helps him cross it by showing him the underground passage. Both animals take part in the crossings, albeit in different ways. The white dog is limited

to showing volunteers a way to the deer. The dog crosses the river on its own without minding whether the knights follow its lead. It is only when Keye stops at the bank of the river that the dog stops and turns around, reacting to Keye's hesitation and inability to follow its guidance. The dog does not make the task of crossing the river any easier. Instead, it expects the knight to jump into the unknown river without doubts and struggle with himself. With its unwavering confidence and effortless movement through the deep water, the dog acts as if it is setting an example and encouraging the knights to follow. The fox, however, takes an active part in the crossing, guiding Walewein underground and making it possible for him to avoid the otherworldly realm. The fox possesses knowledge of the passage that is unknown to anyone else. As a result, Walewein becomes the first person to learn of the existence of the mysterious passage. In order to cross the river directly Walewein would have to face the burning water of purgatory, and traverse the otherworldly realm that he was not meant to enter. The role of the fox is to solve an impossible problem hindering Walewein's quest and prevent the knight from facing the otherworld. Moreover, Roges offers much needed guidance and encouragement. The appearance of the fox becomes a turning point in Walewein's story. The knight's despair and confusion, the result of the supernatural nature of the river, is, consequently, replaced with a rush of newfound determination. Even though Walewein is initially mistrustful of the fox's intentions, the knight has no other choice but to follow the offered advice and the kind encouragement. The protagonist puts his whole trust in his unknown guide, which is ultimately rewarded with the successful crossing of the river, letting the knight continue his quest.

The knights are not always perfect. As the confrontations with the rivers prove, even the bravest of heroes can be swept by doubt, uncertainty, or despair. The protagonists are in need of guidance and support. In moments where the knights cannot face a danger by themselves, the authors introduce much needed solutions and aid by means of animal helpers. Whether it is through physical strength, unwavering will, or knowledge, animals are able to solve the problems the knights have to contend with.

In this way, the focus on the role of the animals in the romances discussed here draws attention to the way the animals were perceived in the past. The relationship between humans and animals

is at the centre of each crossing discussed here. Every confrontation with a river puts the cooperation between the knights and the animals guiding or accompanying them in the forefront, whether directly or not. However, animals themselves are part of nature. By facing challenges posed by the destructive forces of nature in the form of the river, animals appear to be opposing nature at the side of humans, aiding them in the process of crossing. Regardless of whether the animals struggle with deep, boisterous water or appear in unison with it, traversing the depths effortlessly, the animal companions do not let their human companions down. By the same token, the important role of animals in these texts proves the significance that animals, especially horses, have always held for humans. Moreover, the appearance of animal figures in other literary sources, like fairy tales or related romances, proves the affinity contemporary people had for animals and marks their constant presence in human consciousness. Humans have been relying on animals for ages, and this relationship appears to be reflected in literature. As the river crossings show, a knight is helpless without the presence of a beloved animal. It is his animal companion that a man can depend on.

Bibliography

Primary sources

Dutch Romances I: Roman van Walewein, eds. D.F. Johnson, G.H.M. Claassens, Cambridge 2000.

Lanceloet en het hert met de witte voet, in: *Dutch Romances III: Five Interpolated Romances from the Lancelot Compilation,* eds. D.F. Johnson, G.H.M. Claassens, Cambridge 2003, pp. 524–561.

Secondary works

Besamusca B., *The Medieval Dutch Arthurian Material*, in: *The Arthur of the Germans. The Arthurian Legend in Medieval German and Dutch Literature*, eds. W.H. Jackson, S.A. Ranawake, Cardiff 2000, pp. 187–228. https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/besa001medi01_01/index.php [accessed: 6.08.2025].

Besamusca B., *Walewein, Moriaen en de Ridder metter mouwen: Intertekstualiteit in drie Middelnederlandse Arturromans*, Hilversum 1993.

Classen A., *Water in Medieval Literature: An Ecocritical Reading*, Lanham 2018.

Cohen J.J., Duckert L., *Introduction. Eleven Principles of the Elements*, in: *Elemental Ecocriticism: Thinking with Earth, Air, Water, and Fire*, eds. J.J. Cohen, L. Duckert, Minneapolis 2015, pp. 1–26.

Crane S., *Animal Encounters: Contacts and Concepts in Medieval Britain*, Philadelphia 2013.

Draak M., *Inleiding*, in: *Lanceloet en het hert met de witte voet*, ed. M. Draak, Leiden 1984, pp. 5–24. https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/_lan003lanc01_01/index.php [accessed: 6.08.2025].

Draak M., *Onderzoekingen over de Roman van Walewein*, Haarlem 1936. https://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/322559

Duinhoven A.M., *De voorgeschiedenis van Walewein*, "Voortgang. Jaarboek voor de Neerlandistiek XXII" 2004, vol. 22, pp. 71–100. https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/_voo004200401_01/_voo004200401_01_0003.php [accessed: 6.08.2025].

Hugen J., *Roges, Reynaert en de sprookjestraditie. Maartje Draak revisited*, "Spiegel der Letteren" 2017, vol. 59, no. 4, pp. 453–486. https://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/387569

Janssens J.D., *Tekstinterpretatie via een onderzoek van de co- en intertekstuele relaties in de 'Roman van Walewein'*, "Spiegel der Letteren" 1982, vol. 24, no. 2, pp. 81–95. https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/_spi007198201_01/_spi007198201_01_0004.php [accessed: 6.08.2025].

Jongen L., Verhuyck P., *De achterkant van de Ronde Tafel. De anonieme Oudfranse lais uit de 12e en 13e eeuw*, Deventer 1985.

Lacy N.J., *The Typology of Arthurian Romance*, in: *The Legacy of Chrétien de Troyes. Volume I*, eds. N.J. Lacy, D. Kelly, K. Busby, Amsterdam 1987, pp. 33–56.

Putter A., *Walewein in the Otherworld and the Land of Prester John*, in: *Arthurian Literature XVII: Originality and Tradition in the Middle Dutch Roman van Walewein*, eds. B. Besamusca, K. Busby, E. Kooper, Cambridge 1999, pp. 79–99. https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/putt011wale01_01/index.php [accessed: 6.08.2025].

Rudd G., *Greenery. Ecocritical readings of late medieval English literature*, Manchester 2007.

Taylor J.H.M., *The Roman van Walewein: Man into Fox, Fox into Man*, in: *Arthurian Literature XVII: Originality and Tradition in the Middle Dutch Roman van Walewein*, eds. B. Besamusca, K. Busby, E. Kooper, Cambridge 1999, pp. 131–146.

Uther H-J., *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography. Part I. Animal Tales, Tales of Magic, Religious Tales, and Realistic Tales, with an Introduction*, Helsinki 2011, https://edition.fi/kalevalaseura/catalog/book/763 [accesed: 6.08.2025].

Van Oostrom F., *Stemmen op schrift. Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur vanaf het begin tot 1300*, Amsterdam 2016. https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/oost033stem02_01/index.php [accessed: 6.08.2025].

Winkelman J.H., *Intertekstualiteit als probleem*, "Queeste. Tijdschrift over middeleeuwse letterkunde in de Nederlanden" 1994, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 85–96. https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/_que002199401_01/_que002199401_01_0009.php [accessed: 6.08.2025].

Abstract

A river, a man, and an animal: an ecocritical look at two Arthurian romances

The purpose of this article is to examine the motif of the river in two Middle Dutch Arthurian chivalric romances, *Roman van Walewein* and *Lanceloet en het hert met de witte voet*. The rivers in both romances are presented as dangerous obstacles that need to be overcome in order to achieve a certain goal. The passages discussed indicate that the motif is often closely connected with the presence of the figure of an animal companion. The article focuses on the way horses, the fox, and the dog influence the river crossings described in the chivalric romances under discussion. The article analyses the role of the horses, who carry the knights to the other side on the river through deep waters, and the fox and the dog, who instead act as guides. By doing so, I look at way nature is portrayed in medieval literature from a modern, ecocritical perspective. In order to do so, I reflect on the positive influence the presence of an animal exerts on the protagonists and on the process of facing the dangerous forces of nature. The article also looks at the relationship between animals and humans mirrored in the way the knights, the protagonists of medieval romances, cooperate with the animals accompanying them over the course of the adventure.