
Original Article

'Albyon, þat þo was an Ile': Feminist materiality and nature in the Albina narrative

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Abstract The story of Albina and her sisters conventionally justifies the patriarchal foundation of Britain by presenting it as a conflict between men and women, in which the environment of Britain functions as a reflection and extension of the women. Reevaluating the narrative through feminist materiality and ecocritical studies, however, facilitates a fresh approach to understanding how medieval people perceived nature and human-nature relations. Far from functioning as a reflection of humans, the story showcases the active work of nature that is not subordinate to humans, but works with and alongside them, influencing them in ways that highlight the limits of anthropocentric readings of the narrative and nature's role in it.

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The motto of the Canaveral National Seashore, on the east coast of central Florida, reads, 'The way things used to be' (Rein, 2016). This motto comments on the lack of development of the coast within the park, and presents such undeveloped, unsettled nature as belonging to the past. In doing so, it suggests that the natural history of this part of the United States is one of untrammled nature, empty of human presence and influence. Such perceptions of natural space in the U. S. today have long historical roots reaching back to medieval literature.



A story that functions as a largely-overlooked but critical node in this history is the tale of Albina and her sisters. Albina's story appears as a prologue to popular medieval political and secular chronicles of Britain that mythologize the origins of the British people. These histories tell of how Brutus, a descendant of the Trojan Aeneas, came to civilize and rule over the land that would later be named for him, Britain. The prologue to Brutus's history, drawn from the thirteenth-century Anglo-Norman poem *Des Grantz Geantz*, tells a yet earlier story of how an uninhabited isle came to be discovered, named, and settled. In the story, a woman, Albina, and her 32 sisters are married, but resist their marriages, and are abused by their husbands. In response, the sisters kill the husbands, and their father exiles his daughters by casting them to sea on a rudderless ship. Eventually they land upon an isle empty of human habitation and name it Albion, after the eldest sister, Albina. She and her sisters make their home upon Albion, flourish as they eat from its abundant flora and fauna, and are eventually succeeded by their offspring, a race of giants who are fathered by the devil. In turn, Brutus, a descendant of the Trojan Aeneas, arrives, defeats the giants in a genocidal sweep, and settles the island with his followers and descendants. In his memory they rename the isle Britain. The story was later included in Holinshed's *Chronicles*. Shakespeare may have read it there and evoked it in *The Tempest* through the figure of Sycorax, exiled to an unnamed island, and her monstrous son Caliban, fathered by a devil (Forest-Hill, 2006, 245–6). The story continued to be related through the eighteenth century (Bernau, 2007, 112), further demonstrating its long cultural purchase.

From the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries, this story of Albina and her sisters circulated in two versions. One identifies the original home of Albina and her sisters as Greece. The other identifies that home as Syria. The story offers a rhetorical arc that characterizes Albina and her sisters as untamed and chaotic, a characterization that extends to include the isle itself. At the same time, the story also proffers descriptive detail focused on the abundance and fertile presence of nature, and situates the women and their offspring, the giants, as engaging with and even serving the agentive force of the isle's environment. The narrative's ideological investment in nature as a place where 'there be dragons,' a place in need of the civilizing improvements of patriarchal order (Mills, 1997, 46), necessitates representing the island as empty, awaiting a civilizing hand. That hand does not belong to Albina and her sisters, as the story makes clear, but to Brutus and his successors. Such a patriarchal, anthropocentric viewpoint becomes central to how the Albina myth provides a violent justification for the European male domination of nature (which becomes the white male domination of nature). This domination relies not just upon rejection of the women who originate from the east and come to inhabit the island, it also relies upon rejection of the isle's environment, and the agency nature demonstrates in its influence on the women and its interactions with the giants.

Critics routinely follow the narrative's rhetorical trajectory, but ignore the suggestions of its descriptive detail, seeing in the Albina myth three sets of binary conflicts – conflicts between men and women, nature and civilization, and monster and human – that explain and celebrate the patriarchal foundation of Britain. A common element of these responses to the story emphasizes the emptiness of the island Albina and her sisters encounter. Julia Marvin notes that they 'have an empty land and not so much as a bow and arrow for hunting' (Marvin, 2001, 143). Yet such responses to the narrative fundamentally mischaracterize its description of the island: the land is not empty; it is fruitful and filled. The prose *Brut* acknowledges this environmental richness in describing the island as 'all wyldernes,' in which the women find 'neiper man ne woman ne child, but wylde bestes of diuers kyndes' (Anonymous, 1906, 4). The isle burgeons with trees and animals: cornerstones of a diverse ecosystem. This disjointure between what the text details (an island full of nature's things) and how the story rhetorically frames it (empty of humankind) – and the fact that critics have only recognized the latter meaning in the narrative – demonstrates how the erasure of nature takes place both in the Albina myth and in critics' practices. Interpretations of the story that describe the island as uninhabited, like Martin's above, exemplify how easily this erasure of nature can privilege an anthropocentric viewpoint.

In this article, I emphasize the other ideas contained in medieval iterations of the Albina narrative by attending to the alternative interpretations suggested in its descriptive detail. In so doing, I examine two iterations of this story, drawn from mid- and late-fourteenth century England. These two iterations represent both the Greek tradition (*The Riming Chronicle* in the Auchinleck Manuscript, National Library of Scotland Adv MS 19.2.1), and the Syrian (the prose prologue added to the prose *Brut* in Bodleian MS Douce 323). As Sophia Liu has observed, the story reads differently when engaged from ecocritical perspectives (Liu, 2016, 62). Attending to the ways that the story incorporates nature as a nonhuman character becomes key to recognizing how nature actively contributes to narrative events alongside human and supernatural characters. In this way, the Albina myth highlights a moment when a medieval narrative opens a view onto a gender non-conforming, non-binary imagined past of human/nature relations not suffused by the patriarchal Christian narrative of the white European man's dominion over the environment. In such moments we can catch glimpses of alternative modes of human relation to nature in ways that expand our understanding of how medieval people understood human-nature relations in their past, and used the past to imagine queer, non-dualistic gender relations.

In queering this gendered, ecological history, the Albina narrative also showcases medieval representations of nature's influence upon humans, influence that opens new ways for conceptualizing medieval theories about nature and nature-human interactions. Ecofeminism is helpful in allowing us to envision these alternative nature-human interactions in their cultural and



political dimensions. Indeed, ecocritics like Val Plumwood have for more than two decades insisted that ‘feminism must address not only the forms of oppression which afflict humans but also those that afflict nature, [and] illuminate problems in the concept of anthropocentrism’ (Plumwood, 1997, 327). That is, ecofeminists argue that the domination of nature is linked with gender, class, race, and species, and these linkages can interact in ways that oppress all involved. Ecofeminists also point out that nature and culture are not in opposition, but function in cooperation, and that anthropocentrism is a philosophical stance needing critique. Ecofeminism thus helps draw attention to how the Albina story provides a foundational narrative about not simply the British people, but also their colonialist ecopolitics. Indeed, the Albina narrative laid the foundations for English relations with the Americas in ways that shape attitudes towards the environment today.

Nature’s agency in Albion

Nature, at the start of events in the Albina myth, encompasses the woods and the trees and the inhabiting plants and beasts that fill the isle. Describing the nature of Albion at the time of the sisters’ arrival upon the isle, *The Riming Chronicle* explains that, ‘In þat time in all þis land / An acre of land þei ne fond, / Bot wode and wildernisse; / þai no fond tilþe more no lesse’ (Burnley and Wiggins, 2003, l. 323–6). *Tilþe* here refers to cultivation, whose absence indicates that the island demonstrates no signs of being worked by human hands: implicit in the term, as will be discussed further below in connection with the giants, is the assumption that cultivation functions as an exclusively human practice, one immediately recognizable to humans. Yet, although empty of people in this passage, and uncultivated by humans, the poem’s descriptive detail imagines an isle that provides an environment plentiful in trees, herbs, and wild beasts, reflecting a non-anthropocentric perspective at odds with the narrative’s rhetorical trajectory.

As the story unfolds, the prose *Brut* prologue provides descriptive detail that emphasizes connections among nature and Albina and her sisters. The women directly encounter the environment of the isle as they exhaust the provisions from their ship and begin to live off the land. As the story describes this moment, when their food stores are depleted, ‘þei fedde hem with erbes & frutes in seson of þe yeer, and so þey lyved as þei beste myght’ (Anonymous, 1906, 4). Albina and her sisters consume fruits and herbs according to the season and begin to flourish. This passage asserts a movement from separation from the environment to living within it, and further connects the environment to the bodies of Albina and her sisters. They enter nature, unseparated and unsheltered from it.

A review of the prose *Brut*’s prologue through a lens shaped by both ecofeminism and new materialisms reveals that the women do not dominate the

landscape. Rather, the landscape – the environment of the isle, its nature – suffuses the women, even to the point of crafting alternative genders and non-binaristic sexual relations, as I shall discuss in more detail below. The nature-instigated emergence of queered gender and sexual relations on the isle of Albion are part of the history the main *Brut* narrative rhetorically strives to replace. In this complex relationship between the isle of Albion and Albina and her sisters, we witness not the simple binary of a female, wild foundation replaced by a male, orderly foundation, but a more complex history that depicts an active, acting nature that crafts an alternative environment neither male nor female. The environment represented in the both the prose *Brut* prologue and *The Riming Chronicle* possesses a capacity to act and perform agency. Although the fate of the island remains the same, the Albina story in both iterations also gestures to how nature continues to make its presence felt even after the seeming civilization of the isle.

The transformative relationship between the environment and the women becomes more explicit when the prose *Brut* narrative connects the causality of three subsequent developments: the women’s consumption of meat, the increase of their bodies, and the lustful desire they begin to experience. As the *Brut* narrative puts it, the women ‘tokyn flessh of diuers beestys, and bycomen wondir fatte, and so þei desirid mannes cumpanye and mannys kynde þat hem faylled. And for hete þey woxen wondir coraious of kynde þat hem faylled’ (Anonymous, 1906, 4). When I have taught this text, I explain this moment to my students through the medieval humoral discourse on which the passage relies: the women, consuming hot meat, become hot for men. The heat of the meat shifts the women’s naturally cold humors towards the heat of passion, mirroring their eventual coitus. This striking moment illustrates how humoral theory provides a framework that represents ways medieval people understood the material environment, and natural matter – that is, nature with its herbs and fruits and animals – to influence human bodies.

By connecting bodily change to environmental consumption and sexual desire, the prose *Brut* version of the Albina myth uses the discourse of humoral theory to foreground the material environment and showcase its effects upon human bodies, emotions, and gender. It is because the women inhabit this place, consuming its flora and fauna, that they become inhabited by desire. Stacy Alaimo describes the connections between nature and human substance as creating ‘trans-corporeal’ bodies, which help us recognize how ‘the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from the environment,’ and acknowledge that the environment itself is not an ‘inert, empty space’ or ‘a resource for human use,’ but is ‘a world of fleshly beings with their own needs, claims, and actions’ (Alaimo, 2010, 4). In a related vein, object-oriented feminism reminds us to take up the thing’s perspective and consider ‘how things are had’: that is, not to evaluate only how humans have access to objects, but also to consider humans like things, and ‘cultivat[e] posthuman solidarities’ (Behar, 2016, 29).



Ecofeminism and object-oriented feminism thus promote examination of the interactions among Albina and her sisters and nature in ways that prompt identifying interconnections and solidarities among them, and reorient the audience around nature’s perspective, rather than that of humans alone. In these ways, the transcorporeal mingling of nature with Albina and her sisters means that they are no longer a group of sisters led by the anti-heroic, individualized Albina. Instead, Albina and her sisters have been ‘had’ by nature. Possessed by nature, they become part of its material, environmental network, coequal among themselves and acting with and within the environment, rather than sheltering from it in ship and lodges.

Consequently, it is clear from the narrative details in the Albina stories that nature, in its impact on the women’s bodies, possesses active force. The wilderness is not merely backdrop, and nature’s matter, its herbs and fruits and wild beasts, are not passively surrendered for consumption. Nor are they simply figurative parallels for the women. Rather, nature permeates the women with its substance, and enmeshes them within its network. Yet if nature possesses agency, what motivates its actions? Towards what ends does the nature of this isle direct itself through and with the transcorporeal bodies of the women it co-inhabits? What are, as Alaimo describes, its ‘needs, claims, and actions’? *The Riming Chronicle* indicates that nature’s agency is directed towards growth, plenty, and reproduction. Abounding with trees, woods, and wilderness, the isle Albion bends its active force towards plenteousness. It burgeons with a specific quality: fecundity. Alaimo’s points help reveal how the Albina myth invites us to see that the women’s sexual desire and reproduction is not a result of their own desire, but of nature’s agency and interaction with its things. In this respect, the story seems to reflect Alaimo’s notion of nature as more than a dwelling place for humans. It is substance: matter that mingles with its residential human matter, shaping their orientations to match its own. In this way, the nature of the isle intimately reorients the women’s identities and relationship to match its own, shaping Albina and her sisters’ expression of their sexuality and driving them towards procreation.

Queer nature in Albion

By enmeshing itself with the women, nature acts in both versions of the legend as a conservative force that corrects the queer divergence from conventional gender roles symbolized in the women’s resistance to the marriages arranged for them by their father. In the preceding events of the myth, the sisters have shown themselves resistant to their role as wives. Their resistance originates in dismay at the thought of change, which they perceive as a degradation. The women become angry and rebellious; they refuse to accept their gendered role as women within the medieval institution of marriage. Their refusal means that, by



resisting their subordinate role as wives, they also refuse the expectations and responsibilities accorded to wives in the Middle Ages, including procreation. The women desire to control their own transformations – as the story makes clear, so too does nature.

In the prose *Brut* prologue, the sisters murder their husbands, thereby further ungendering themselves by shifting themselves into the masculine role in the household. In consequence, by the time of their arrival upon the isle, the sisters' gender identity has become ambiguous: although assigned female at birth, they have resisted and refused to occupy that identity. These sisters are additionally queered by their material intimacy with the environment that begins to feed them and initiates their subsequent change. This change expresses itself in lust, the first step – from the perspective of nature – towards procreation, bringing forth. Within the framework of medieval gender expectations, which treat women as naturally cold-natured but easily susceptible to overwhelming lusts, nature influences the women in ways that seem to reorient them away from gender ambiguity and towards a bountiful womanhood epitomized in procreation. Nature feminizes the women through its transcorporeal engagement with their bodies.

In the prose *Brut* prologue, the devil's copulation with the women further emphasizes how nature influences and interacts with the bodies that inhabit it. Describing the arrival of the devil, the prose *Brut* reads:

Whanne the Devyll that perceyued and wente by divers contres, & nome bodyes of þe eyre & likyng natures shad of men, & come into þe land of Albyon and lay by þe wymmen, and schad tho natures vpon hem, & they conceiued, and after þei broughten forth Geauntes. (Anonymous, 1906, 4)

The devil decides to copulate with the women and does so using 'natures shad of men'; that is, the devil takes on shapes defined by air and nature, and 'sheds those natures' upon the women. Thus, in the prose *Brut*, the devil becomes a vehicle for nature, enfolded within its shape, and through this interactive partnership the women conceive. In this respect, the prose *Brut* reflects ecofeminist notions about the permeability of bodies and the environment.

The theories of Karen Barad help illuminate how the *Brut* version of the Albina myth imagines nature's agency in ways that diverge from the anthropocentric vision of nature as an allegory of a human-like guiding intelligence, imagining it instead in different, non-human terms. For Barad, intra-action 'signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies' through which distinct agencies emerge, and notes that agencies 'are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement; they don't exist as individual elements' (Barad, 2007, 33). Interpreting the relations among devil, women, and nature using Barad's conceptual framework, we come to understand nature's agency as operating through the entanglement of devil, human, vegetation, and beasts. For the Albina myth and its ecofeminist, materially-oriented interpretations, Barad's



argument serves as a reminder that the agency of nature is perceived and experienced in the story through its effects on matter: human matter, devilish matter, the matter of plants and beasts of the isle.

Focusing on the role of agency in the text at this moment also emphasizes its fluid representations of women and nature’s agency. Intra-acting with the devil’s and nature’s substance, the women ‘bring forth,’ a phrase in the text that signals recognition of the women’s own agency. The prose *Brut* prologue emphasizes that reproductive agency belongs to all three parties working together: nature, the devil, and the women. Representing the conception in this way does not create a parallel between an allegorical Mother Nature and the human mothers laboring to produce. Nor does it represent a binary coupling of male and female. Instead, the prose *Brut* represents nature as reconfiguring, inhabiting, and transforming the matter of humans and devil.

In spite of the seemingly conventional re-gendering of the women by nature, the *Brut*’s representation of reproduction actually presents an intriguingly queered collection of nontypically gendered characters: there is agendered, polysexual nature, the devil who presents as a man but is in biblical tradition asexual, and Albina and her gender-shifting sisters. Nature becomes a third sexual partner and a third parent, and as this third parent it facilitates the bringing forth of something new, something neither devil nor human, but wholly novel to the isle’s environment: the giants. The queer assemblage that produces the giants foregrounds a complexity of relations elided by Brutus’ later takeover. The present of the isle of Albion in the story, the past of Britain to its readers, presents a queer history.

In both *The Riming Chronicle* and the prose *Brut* prologue, references to the women disappear immediately after conception of the giants. From this moment forward the narrative in both texts focuses on the giants. Figuratively, the women become decomposed into the island, reconstituted within the bodies of their offspring, in a final transformation. Decomposing the human gives rise to the posthuman. These relations, in a reading of the story informed by ecofeminism and object-oriented feminism, showcase elements of the texts concealed by anthropocentric readings of the story and interpretations of nature. The disappearance of the women from the narrative has been referred to by critics as erasure, their being ‘replaced by – subsumed within – gross corpora’ (Cohen, 1999, 49). Yet disappearance and erasure are concepts and developments in the story that need further evaluation. Just as critical interpretations of the island as uninhabited prior to the arrival of Albina and her sisters require a perspective that sets aside plants and animals as inhabitants, framing the women’s state by the story’s conclusion as ‘erased’ privileges an anthropocentric narrative and ignores how both texts recognize collective, cooperative identities. This critical practice assumes that identifying human existence relies upon human separation from nature. In contrast, I would suggest another interpretation of the women’s status at the conclusion of the story, which pays close

attention to how the texts characterize their relationship to nature. Before the women seemingly disappear, they represent and act with the nature of the isle working to its best effect, bent on the act of generation regardless of circumstances. Like the ‘wode and wildernisse’ that surrounds them in the narratives of the prose *Brut* and *The Riming Chronicle*, they grow within and flourish in nature. The texts’ characterization of the enmeshment of the women with nature means that they are not erased, but rather sink into and become the nature that has enfolded, infused, and reoriented them. They are not subsumed within the flesh of their children but are wholly ‘intermeshed’ with the isle itself, to use Alaimo’s term (Alaimo, 2010, 2). Rather than seeing absence as a sign of patriarchally-motivated erasure, we can instead (or also) see this disappearance as a non-anthropocentric entanglement of women and isle, and perceive it not as absence, but as a different kind of presence. This counter-interpretation pushes toward a recognition of identity as capacious, multiple, not separable by species, but as speaking with a polyvocal, inseparable voice. When nature speaks at the end of the story, it speaks with a voice that combines trees, wild beasts, women, and giants.

Nature, giants, and nonhuman cultivation

The giants can consequently be understood not simply as the children of colonizers, but as offspring of the environmental plenteousness of the isle, as nature’s children. Indeed, the narratives offer a contrasting arc for the giants that distinguishes them from their mothers. In *The Riming Chronicle*, the arc involving the women moves from focusing on human alterations to the environment as Albina and her sisters build lodges – that is, they modify the landscape for their purposes, producing the *tilþe* initially absent from the isle – to their orientation towards nature before becoming, finally, part of a natural collective. The arc involving the giants is one in which modification of the landscape never takes place. Instead, says the prose *Brut*, they ‘dwelld in Caves and hulles at here wille’ (Anonymous, 1906, 4). *The Riming Chronicle* adds that ‘In grete hilles þai woned here / & liued bi erbes & bi wilde dere; / Milke & water þai dronk nouȝt elles’ (Burnley and Wiggins, 2003, l. 379–81). It later states that ‘Schepe þai hadde’ (383), meaning that they also cultivated sheep, using their wool for clothes. In these descriptions, the texts emphasize that the giants do not live apart from nature, but within it. In their choice not to build, but instead to inhabit naturally-provided caves and hillside dwellings, the giants reject the colonizing efforts of their mothers and live entangled within the flora and fauna of their third parent, nature. Their rejection of colonization and European-style modes of cultivation is pronounced enough that, when in *The Riming Chronicle* Brutus arrives, the isle once again seems to appear as it did



before the arrival of Albina and her sisters: ‘Al was wode & and wildernisse, / Her was no tilþe, more no lesse’ (Burnley and Wiggins, 2003, 365–6).

Yet even as they choose not to modify the landscape, the giants do manipulate nature, an act reflected in their cultivation of sheep and consumption of milk. Relying upon sheep for wool and milk requires, if not outright domestication, then certainly some development of livestock. Nevertheless, the giants’ practices strikingly require no clearing of land for pasturage. Emerging from permeable, transcorporeal bodies full of nature’s substance, the giants, even more than their human mothers, are not separate from, but interact with the natural environmental network of the isle. That is, while critics assessing the Albina myth often note a distinction between nature and culture – an ideological frame that the rhetorical arc of the narrative promotes – the descriptive detail in both the *Brut* and *The Riming Chronicle* provides evidence for another framework altogether, a framework in which nature and culture intertwine. Nature is cultured; nature provides the material of culture; nature and the giants work together to enact culture. In restoring and following nature’s plan for the isle, the giants both acknowledge nature’s authority to determine environment, and also subordinate and accommodate themselves to this plan so effectively that the land, despite the giants’ livestock manipulations, still appears to be all ‘wode & wildernisse.’

Recognizing that the giants have cultivated the landscape in ways that both support nature’s design and also accommodate their own needs requires recognizing wilderness as nature’s cultivation. Furthermore, recognizing nature’s work of cultivation requires setting aside the false binary of ‘nature v. culture’ to acknowledge instead that nature can be and can produce culture, here made manifest through the giants’ and nature’s cultivation of the isle. In place of this binary, we might instead recognize that the story presents its readers with natureculture, a neologism developed by Donna Haraway (Haraway, 2003). The concept of natureculture emphasizes the entanglement of nature and culture that is inseparable in ecological relationships.

According to the alternative reading suggested in the narratives’ descriptive detail, Brutus’ arrival offers not the triumphal colonization that the legend’s narrative trajectory asserts, but is rather an erasure of the legacy of Albina and her sisters, one that also elides the cultivation practices of the giants and nature, and in consequence oppresses nature itself. The Albina myth and its place in the *Brut* narrative and *The Riming Chronicle* reveal that oppression of nature and marginalized communities go hand-in-hand in the dominant medieval narrative of British history that colonists brought to the Americas.

The alternative reading provided by the descriptive detail in these two versions of the legend reveals the existence of a different perspective in England from the one most commonly associated with later English colonizers. That Brutus and his compatriots – represented and claimed as heroic, larger-than-life men with the capacity to settle Albion and make it Britain – choose not to notice, or fail to see evidence of natureculture management anticipates how, a couple

centuries later, Europeans similarly overlooked signs of cultivation and land management when settling North America. In viewing Native Americans as not using the land, and therefore as having no need to claim or own it, Europeans justified the displacement of indigenous peoples in North America (Huggan and Tiffin, 2015, 7–11). In later narratives of conquest, the legacy of Brutus is emphasized, while the alternative perspectives in the prose *Brut* prologue and *The Rimming Chronicle* have been silenced.

I hope that I have, in privileging the perspective of nature, shown how medieval English writers described an alternative ecological position, even as the rhetorical trajectory of their narratives resisted acknowledging this view of nature and human relationships to nature. Nature's efforts in the Albina stories do not simply assert the animality of humans; instead, they show how nature contributes to, affects, and even reshapes humans, from their humors to their gender and their relationships to the land. Encountering these perspectives in historical contexts encourages us not only to trace but also to question the long roots of environmental narratives still operative today.

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