



# FROM KNIGHT ERRANT TO EXPLORING PIONEER

The Influence of Medieval Romances on the Depiction  
of Human and Non-Human Others in John Filson’s  
“The Adventures of Col. Daniel Boon”

## INTRODUCTION

Entering the age known as the Anthropocene, humankind has been progressively gaining awareness of the impact that its constant striving for progress and the exponential growth of its ability to transform the world around it have on the environment in which it lives. Climate changes are a direct consequence of invasive human actions such as deforestation, the burning of fossil fuels, industrial activities, intensive agriculture, and livestock farming. If on the one hand, humans have always attempted to impose themselves over nature, at the same time they not only crave a connection with it, but are, in fact, a part of it. This should lead to a reconsideration of human beings' place in the world, from ruling planetary species to only one among many, tied together in complex and delicate ecosystems. This awareness should also entail a further reflection on human nature in order to understand the mechanisms behind the relationship between people and nature. Myths from time immemorial have represented the way humans consider themselves and the world around them, have influenced the ideology of nations, and have reflected and affected people's system of beliefs and actions. As Richard Slotkin argues, “a people unaware of its myths is likely to continue living by them, though the world around that people may change and demand changes in their psychology, their world view, their ethics, their institutions” (1973: 4–5). It is thus crucial to analyze more in depth the patterns that can be traced in myths and literary

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works as “[w]hat people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them” (White 1967: 1205). Only by becoming aware of the narrative filters through which they tell their own story and history can humans gain a better understanding of their actions and hope to change their course in a way that is more respectful to the environment surrounding them.

In this light, this article aims to analyze, through a comparative approach, a narrative that lies at the foundation of American mythogenesis, John Filson’s “The Adventures of Col. Daniel Boone” (1784), in close relation to major works of medieval chivalric romances from an ecocritical perspective. Through this analysis, the article seeks to explore the way in which medieval patterns have been employed in the American mythopoeic process, especially concerning the myths of the frontier and the wilderness, which have had a lasting impact on national ideological discourses. In this context, medievalism has been often employed to support and justify an anthropocentric and expansionist agenda with grievous consequences on the way in which Americans engage with the land, constantly romanticized while being conquered. At the same time, this article will also pay attention to how this tendency is also accompanied by an androcentric and ethnocentric rhetoric, which has contributed to the marginalization from dominant national discourses of significant sections of the population due to their race and/or gender. By investigating how narratives develop, evolve, and circulate across time and space, it will be possible to reveal the harmful logic they carry, and stress the importance of shifting the narrative toward more sustainable intra- and inter-species relations.

My approach, although focusing on notions of the wilderness in early American literature, distances itself from first wave ecocritical approaches that left unquestioned the nature/culture divide, celebrating the idea of pristine, uninhabited wilderness. Rather, the stance of this article is aligned with second wave critiques of these concepts, in tune with figures such as Latour (1993), Chakrabarty (2009) and Haraway (2003) who argue for blurring the demarcation between nature and culture. At the same time, this article also acknowledges the need for an intersectional

approach, neglected by early ecocriticism, that takes into consideration not only the otherization of nature, but also that based on gender and race. Indeed, attitudes toward the nonhuman can reflect and bear an impact on those toward other humans. While frontier narratives have been extensively commented upon in terms of the harmful logic they put forward (Slotkin 1976; Smith 1978; Kolodny 1984; White 1991; Limelick 2000; Hallock 2003; Ray 2013), a recent shift in environmental humanities toward an attention placed on temporality and scale (Nixon 2011; Morton 2013; Clark 2019) suggests the relevance of looking further at the roots of mankind's attitudes toward nature: "we need this longer view [...] not only to understand our species but more firmly to secure its future" (Wilson 1996: x). In this sense, analysing a frontier narrative by tracing within it influences deriving from previous times, specifically medieval, emphasizes the endurance of certain narratives, and through them, the mindsets that have led to the current climate crisis.

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#### ATTITUDES TOWARD NATURE IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE AND EARLY AMERICAN HISTORY

Western thought has always been characterized by an ambivalent attitude toward the natural world, torn between a desire for conquest and a need for a harmonious connection with nature. Both perspectives are represented in literary works, even though the former outlook appears to prevail in literary narratives and in dominant national discourses. Lynn White, Jr. argues that a changed relationship between humans and nature began toward the end of the seventh century as "[m]an's relation to the soil was profoundly changed. Formerly man had been part of nature; now he was the exploiter of nature" (1967: 1204) due to agricultural developments. He further links the separation between humans and nature with Christianity, seen as an anthropocentric religion that "not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends" (1205). He argues that thirteenth century natural theology ceased to focus on the decoding of the physical symbols of God's communication. Instead, it started to interpret God's mind by discovering how creation functions, thus stimulating the scientific

and technological advance that eventually led to the current climate crisis. While his theory has received various critiques, his “comments about the Judeo-Christian tradition are based upon late-classical and medieval interpretations of scripture” (George 2010: 33). Indeed, Mark Muldoon shows that Thomas Aquinas’s system of thought, for instance, revolved around an anthropocentric view, where “[n]ature is seen more as an object for human use which satisfies biological needs and serves spiritual knowledge rather than a subject of spiritual importance in its own right” (2003: 86).

A utilitarian attitude towards nature can be actually found much earlier, for instance in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, where the narrative dramatizes the nature/culture divide. Nonetheless, it is in the Middle Ages that great changes in perception appear to have taken place, sedimented, and laid the foundations that have influenced later historical periods. According to David Herlihy, medieval society’s position toward nature between the sixth and tenth century was mainly ‘adversarial,’ characterized by a “fear or awe of nature as the abode of mysterious monsters, spirits and powers inimical to men” (1980: 101). In this context, “religious traditions of Judeo-Christianity reinforced this fear of the wilderness [...] presented as the opposite of Paradise” (108). Then, in the ‘collaborative’ stage between early eleventh century and early fourteenth century, society experienced a sustained growth, during which people moved in surrounding forests and wastelands, enlarged the cultivated areas, and increased their confidence in the ability to use natural resources. It is in this period that “[t]he truly aggressive ethic toward the environment, which has remained for the better or worse part of the Western culture” (116) appears to have begun. At the same time, there existed alternative views that valued nature for its ability to channel the spiritual and supernatural realms, mainly shared by monks retreating in forests to find spiritual renewal. The Middle Ages thus presented an ambivalent attitude towards nature. While the dominant position was mainly one that perceived the natural world as a threat or as a material resource, this was counterbalanced by a need to feel a connection with nature.

This ambivalent perception is one that persisted in subsequent periods of history, recurring continually, and that can also be seen

in the Puritans' view of nature after arriving on the New World's shores. Indeed, the attitude of the New England settlers towards the American wilderness was one of fear mingled with hope. On the one hand, their religious beliefs led them to see nature as a threat that could lead the community's members to indulge in earthly impulses and to recede into a savage state. Their depiction of a "hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men" (Bradford, 1898: 167) reflected their sense of isolation and the material hardship of settling in a new foreign land. At the same time, the land was also seen with eyes full of hope and promise for the future. The wilderness was perceived as a temporary condition "thro' which we are passing to the Promised Land" (Mather 1998: 22), a trial to endure in order to finally build the 'city upon the hill.' Yet, as their experience progressed, the settlers' necessity to adapt and expand in the new territory grew. As a consequence, while still influenced by Puritan and European culture, the pioneers who engaged in the relentless exploration of the frontier also adapted their narratives to new contexts.

Both in the Middle Ages and in early American history, the ambivalent relationship between humans and nature was explored in literary texts. Among the archetypal places that medieval literature has developed and established, the forest—while not absent from classical literature—became in chivalric romances a central, symbolic place, one that left an indelible stamp on Western imagination (Boitani 2007: 63). While recurring as a literary *topos* of great symbolic value, in reality medieval forests were not a pristine wilderness. In fact, many forests had already come under the jurisdiction of law and were mainly used as royal preserves. Forests were also an economic resource, a place for hunting, collecting wood and for pasture. Finally, they were a space where outsiders—outlaws, hermits, fugitives, and madmen—found refuge from the laws of society. Despite this reality, within chivalric romances "the wilderness was mostly a literary landscape, an environmental imaginary" (Bolt 2015: 21). The forest was thus a space of distinct otherness in relation to the civic world, one of adventure, spiritual growth, madness, temptation, enchantment. Indeed, medieval romances "portrayed the forest in both positive and negative lights, presenting either thrilling

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opportunities for adventure and redemption or else posing sinister threats of violence and madness” (Aberth 2013: 128). If on the one hand it is a perilous place filled with adversaries both human and nonhuman to defeat, where knights venture to test their honor and masculinity, the forest is also a place of refuge, where one can escape from a society that contrasts with one’s own individual will, as in Gottfried von Strassburg’s *Tristan*, or that is corrupted, as in Thomas Chestre’s *Sir Launfal*.

However, gradually, a different kind of wilderness starts to dominate the Western imagination, that of the New World (Boitani 2007: 68). Yet, the knight has never stopped setting forth into the wilderness. However changed his appearance and the context surrounding him, the pattern established in chivalric romances can still be found in the stories of the American pioneers. The same ambivalence towards nature is presented in narratives of the frontier, which has been typically seen as the “the meeting point between savagery and civilization” (Turner 1894: 200). If the wilderness represented a material obstacle for the frontiersmen, who had to face hardship and perilous situations, it also embodied a promise of freedom, renewal, and the pathway toward progress. Even though the American wilderness appears as highly different from medieval forests, the trajectory of the knights to and from it are closely paralleled in frontier narratives. Here, the pioneers are presented as heroes who set forth into the wilderness, defeating wild animals and indigenous people to pave the way of civilization in the name of Providence. Yet, there also existed another counter-current centering around primitivism and the cult of the wilderness. While many were affected by it,

[s]uch a mood of refined hostility to progress [...] could hardly strike very deep in a society committed to an expansive manifest destiny. A romantic love of the vanishing wild West could be no more than a self-indulgent affectation beside the triumphant official cult of progress [...] For such people—and they were the vast majority—the western hunter and guide was praiseworthy [...] because he blazed trails that hard-working farmers could follow. (Smith 1978: 52–3)

While the similarities between chivalric romances and frontier narratives may be seen as coincidental, specific parallelisms between them would lead to believe that their affinity goes

beyond the sharing of universal archetypal patterns. Indeed, “[w]hen America became conscious of herself, she strove to acquire the cultural inheritance of Europe [...] The American conquest of the Middle Ages has something [...] of that deep sentimental urge which we might expect in a man who should set out to find his lost mother” (Curtius 1973: 587). Thus, while drawing from autochthonous sources, the early American writers also attempted to appropriate European literature, transforming it, and making it their own. As Slotkin suggests, “the evolution of American myth was a synthetic process of reconciling romantic-conventional myths of Europe to the American experience” (1973: 17). The pattern of medieval romances, in particular, not only reflected the ambivalence felt toward the American land, but also offered a historical and mythical analogue to describe the experience of the settlers in familiar terms. It created a direct line of continuity with heroic enterprises and allowed for the creation of rhetoric of renewal and regeneration of a glorious past embodied in the frontier exploration.

#### THE PIONEER’S QUEST: JOHN FILSON’S DANIEL BOONE

In America, the first figure to achieve a nationwide mythlike quality is Daniel Boone, first appearing in John Filson’s *The Discovery, Settlement and Present State of Kentucky* (1784). His character, based on a real pioneer, received such a wide-spread appreciation and became so influential for subsequent literary works possibly because he embodied the notion of Manifest Destiny, the American mission of progress, and the nation’s relation to the land. Indeed, America was looking for hero-figures who could represent the nation’s unique experience, and the pioneers of the frontier offered just that. The writing of *The Discovery, Settlement and Present State of Kentucky* was originally motivated by Filson’s personal interest, as a land speculator, in advertising and encouraging further settlement in Kentucky. The work thus portrays the area as a paradisiacal land of bounty and fertility, a “second paradise” (Filson 1784: 44). At the same time, it also depicts it as an untamed wilderness where the hero, Boone, and his toil to settle the land determine the destiny of Kentucky as “one of the most opulent and powerful states on the continent of North

America" (62), and that of America as a nascent imperial republic. While drawing from autochthonous sources, Boone's narrative also presents numerous features that link it to chivalric romances, appropriating and 'Americanizing' them. The similarity was also noticed by figures such as William Gilmore Simms, who claimed that "in an age of chivalry—during the Crusades—Boon would have been a knight-errant, equally fearless and gentle" (1962: 150). In the section "The Adventures of Col. Daniel Boon," the narrative itself is structured "to read like Arthurian romance" (Faragher 1990: 375), presenting a series of immersions into the wilderness and emergences back to the civilized world.

Yet, the similarities are not limited to the general trajectory of knight and pioneers. In fact, Boone decides "to wander through the wilderness of America, in quest of the country of Kentucky" (40). Here, the language vividly calls to mind the beginning of many chivalric romances. Furthermore, the main motivation for his journey is said to be "curiosity," which "is natural to the soul of man [...] in time the mysterious will of Heaven is unfolded, and we behold our conduct, from whatsoever motives excited, operating to answer the important designs of heaven" (39). Thus, the hero is moved to explore the wilderness by a desire of adventure and exploration, placed within the providential framework of destiny. This is not only true for Boone, but also for Arthurian knights. It is in fact very common as a plot device for the knight, guided implicitly by destiny, to enter the forest in order to prove his skills and prowess through adventure. For instance, in Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval* (late twelfth century), Perceval, raised in a forest by his mother to avoid that he may become a knight, meets his destiny anyway by encountering some knights in the woods who lead him to begin his own adventure.

Furthermore, Boone's narrative displays ambivalent attitudes towards the natural world, presenting it both as beautiful and bountiful, and as a treacherous and threatening obstacle to his mission. Indeed, while describing the landscape as a "howling wilderness, the habitation of savages and wild beasts" (39), he also admires its beauty: "nature was here a series of wonders, and a fund of delight" (41). Moments of ecstatic contemplation, in which God seems to make himself apparent, seem to imply the notion of nature



as an “integral part of the divine plan for the regeneration of man” (Slotkin 1973: 279). Similarly, in *Perceval*, nature is not only seen as delightful—“He entered the forest, / And the heart deep inside him / Leapt with joy at the sweet / Season and the happy sound / Of birds singing from trees” (Chrétien lines 85–89)—but also as the setting of his spiritual journey of atonement and growth. At the same time, it is also filled with continuous trials, tests, and wild beasts that Perceval must overcome. In the fourteenth century Middle English chivalric romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, “the contrast between the security of the court, and the discomfort and danger, real and supernatural, of the quest landscape plays a central role” (Saunders 1993: 148). Unlike most romances, the description of the landscape presents here marked mimetic qualities that highlight the hardship and danger of Gawain’s journey. As chivalry can only be proven through adventure, “[t]he forest thus becomes necessary, a landscape both delightful and dangerous in its offering of this adventure,” which “becomes the chosen destiny of the knight” (Saunders 1993: 80).

In facing the wilderness, the hero must possess heroic qualities dictated by a moral code of honor. Boone is presented as “an American knight errant venturing afar to battle the infidel [...] [H]e, like the heroes of Scott’s historical romances, participated in a ‘medieval’ fantasy” (Herman 1998: 445). He showcases qualities such as chivalry, composure, and self-restraint, saving damsels in distress and companions taken captive. Indeed, knights were required to adhere to a rigid set of behavioral rules, the wilderness being the setting where to learn and improve them: “a true romance knight has great physical strength, skills, and courage, yet also excels at certain virtues, such as honor, charity, and courtesy. It is a knight’s duty to use these qualities to serve and fight for his lord and, most importantly, to defend the weak” (Lupack 2007: 85). However, while noble birth is the first condition for a man in chivalric romances to become a good knight, for Boone nobility of behavior is not given by noble blood but is inherent within his nature, showcasing a democratization of the figure of the knight that best fits the context of the young nation. Despite the fact that Boone was a poorly educated backwoodsman, Filson presents him with a natural gentility and eloquence. In this respect, the knights

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and the pioneer are both highly romanticized. The real Boone, in fact, complained that “[m]any heroic actions and chivalrous adventures are related of me which exist only in the regions of fancy” (Boone qtd. in Faragher: 384). Similarly, in medieval times, “out of the need for a specific representation of the desired shared culture, the myth of the knight took root and flourished within the national imagination,” although historical evidence “does not support the popular literary representation of the knight as romantic, chivalrous figure” (Moskowitz 2006). The gap between reality and fictional narrative in both cases seems motivated by the necessity of creating a mythology that reflects and supports the ideology and interests of the culture to which they belong: “the symbiosis between America and the medieval world grows from the central fact that each has been invented and that neither in its mythic form corresponds very closely to historical scrutiny” (Rosenthal and Szarmach 1989: 4).

An essential aspect, among the heroic qualities a hero must possess, is the display of virility and masculine prowess: “cultures typically express and enact their views of power and heroism by the ways in which they construct ideals and norms of masculine identity,” which “are absorbed by a culture through its stories [...] From the Dark Ages until today [...] King Arthur is arguably the secular hero of medieval and post-medieval Western civilization” (Wheeler 1992: 1). In the *Historia Regum Britanniae* (c.1136), Geoffrey De Monmouth’s depiction of King Arthur, where he is portrayed as a conqueror of Europe and a Christian protector against the idolatrous Saracens, shaped much of the subsequent Arthurian tradition. Here, the king is presented as a model of masculinity, associated with action, physical dominance, and expansion. Western culture seems to have adopted through time a similar concept of masculine authority, a “leadership of the heroic style: aggressive, invasive, exemplary, risk-taking” (Keegan 1987: 10). A similar narrative can be traced in the American discourse of Manifest Destiny, depicting the nation as charged by Providence with the mission to expand its model of democracy and Christianity, one also embodied by Filson’s Boone. In the period directly following Boone’s own time, when Americans were concerned over notions of their own masculinity in the context of urban middle-classes

(Herman 1998: 439), the pioneer provided a model of masculinity to which aspire in order to restore the Americans' threatened virility. In fact, most frontier narratives present a strongly androcentric perspective. As Brigitte Georgi-Findlay assesses, "what has come to be defined as the quintessential American plot [...] reveals itself as a story based on a rigid dichotomy of sex roles that not only denies women active, heroic roles but defines them as obstacles to the male hero's freedom" (1996: 6). Indeed, women were relegated to the domestic environment, where they occupied the role of the wife, the mother, and the lady in need of saving. In fact, numerous have been the women writers who have made their voice heard by showing their perspective on the frontier life. Many of these works consist in personal narratives which can be "effective sources of counter-hegemonic insight" (Personal Narratives Group 1989: 7), contributing to creating alternative myths to the dominant ones. Despite this, the power and influence of this myth remains powerful, however far from being historically true.

Hunting plays an especially crucial role in the expression of masculinity. Indeed, the hunt represents in many cultures a rite of passage deeply linked with the cultural constructs of manhood. Further, stories of hunting also provide a way to cope with the fear triggered by the wilderness and wild animals by imposing one's dominance over them through prowess and violence. Through this act, the hunter's identity is restored, providing a justification for the violence exerted upon the nonhuman. As Slotkin assesses, "the consummation of his hunting quest in the killing of the quarry [...] gives him full possession of the powers of the wilderness" (1973: 551). This is guaranteed by the accompanying of an ethic of self-restraint that minimizes the implicit negative consequences of the act. Indeed, the violence of the hero in general, not only in the context of the hunt, was justified and celebrated as long as it respected what was believed to be God's will, both for pioneers and for knights: "chivalry was a code of violence in defense of a prickly sense of honor [...] just as thoroughly as it was a code of restraint [...] Prowess [...] is a gift of God" (Kaeuper 2000: 99-100, 105). In Boone's narrative numerous instances of hunting sessions are described: "we began to hunt and reconnoitre the country. We found everywhere abundance of wild beasts of all sorts,

through this vast forest. The buffaloes were [...] fearless, because ignorant of the violence of man” (Filson: 40).

The importance placed on hunting is also present in medieval romances. Indeed, the hunt was not only crucial for knights to refine their martial prowess and skills, but was also strongly linked to chivalric values. Especially in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, “hunting scenes” are used “as a primary organizing principle” (Stuhmiller 2005: 230), furthering the emphasis of Gawain as an embodiment of civilized society versus the wilderness. The importance of the hunt in medieval times is also stressed by the fact that the royal preserves were expressly created for the preservation of the wildlife, “which in turn would insure the survival of a fundamental royal ritual—the hunt” (Harrison 1992: 69). Indeed, “[t]he hunt ritualizes and reaffirms the king’s ancient nature as civilizer and conqueror of the land” where “the chase may re-enact, in a purely symbolic way, the historical conquest of the wilderness” (74). This is exactly what, less symbolically and more materially, Filson’s narrative celebrates, showcasing a strongly anthropocentric mindset, where the nonhuman is only seen as an obstacle to the hero’s mission and as an instrument for him to prove his manhood.

Another way for Boone to prove his masculinity is by defeating enemies, in his case, Native Americans. This also allows him to display a courteous and chivalrous behavior by defeating Indian opponents who had taken some girls captive. This event, while drawing from captivity narratives, calls to mind the rescuing of the damsel in distress motif present in countless chivalric romances from *Sir Orpheo* to *Yvain*. The Indian, in Filson’s account, represents the Other, the embodiment of savagery in opposition to Boone’s civilizing power. Indeed, most cultures and societies construct their identity by defining it in relation and contrast to other cultures and societies “as we are dealing with a fundamental epistemological phenomenon that characterized both the medieval world and our own” (Classen 2004: 21). Boone perceives Native Americans as savages and dangerous threats to the values he embodies and his mission: “We were [...] exposed daily to perils and death amongst savages and wild beasts, not a white man in the country but ourselves” (Filson: 42). Placing Native Americans on the same level as animals suggests and reiterates a common

prejudice that perceives them as akin to beasts, a level below humanity, and therefore less worthy of respect. While admitting condescendingly that “Indians are not so ignorant as some suppose them,” Filson portrays them in a strongly stereotypical way: “they are very hardy, bearing heat, cold, hunger and thirst, in a surprising manner, and yet no people are more addicted to excess in eating and drinking” (76). However, Native Americans are not depicted in an entirely negative light. After taking him captive, they treat Boone with respect, and adopt him as one of their own. Yet, the pioneer is always carefully presented as superior to them, as he purposefully tries not to exceed them in hunting (50), and he “received as good treatment as prisoners could expect from savages” (49).

The presentation of Native Americans in frontier narratives eerily parallels that of a figure who recurs frequently in the medieval imagination, typically seen as Other and as an embodiment of savagery, that is the wild man. Charles Long describes the wild man as “a child of nature” (1986: 81), a definition often associated to the perception of Native Americans as ‘noble savages.’ Wild men are usually depicted as uncivilized creatures displaying both human and animal features, potentially “violent, aggressive and lustful” (Bernheimer 1952: 3–4, 34), who live in forests and show hostility toward the hero or the court. When confronting these wild creatures, “the heroes antithetically assert themselves as courteous. Many examples of this are presented in the Arthurian corpus” (Ferlampin-Acher 2017: 244). Numerous features of this figure are similar to those associated with Native Americans in the depictions of early American settlers, both presenting a relationship of peaceful cohabitation with the wilderness and considered as a threat to society’s dominant values. At times, however, the wild men are presented as friendly and helpful. For instance, in *Yvain*, Calogrenant meets a “a fellow, black as mulberry, full / hideous, massive beyond measure” (Chrétien: lines 286–7), who, despite possessing great physical prowess, kindly gives the knight directions to a magic fountain, similarly to native guides who helped pioneers find their way in the American wilderness. However, the figure of the Other in chivalric romances is most often associated, like in the case of the Native Americans, with the abduction

motif, where a damsel is taken away into the forest by wild men or supernatural beings (Bernheimer: 126).

At times, the knight himself, taken by a temporary madness caused by either grief, loss, shame, rage, or love-ache, runs away in the woods becoming a wild man. However, he eventually regains sanity and re-enters society, achieving a higher order of moral balance (Salisbury 1993: 160). This is the case, for instance, of Lancelot, Yvain, and Sir Orfeo. According to Harrison, as the knight temporarily loses himself, he confronts the shadows of his own wild alienated nature, from which his prowess derives, in order to subsequently reaffirm and regenerate the forces that defend the social order (1992: 67). Similarly, while being presented by Filson as a civilizing force, certain features of Boone, from his love of nature to his ability to survive in the wild, have produced perceptions of the pioneer as 'Indian-like.' Yet, Boone still believes that Native Americans are to be substituted by white settlements: "thus we behold Kentucke, lately a howling wilderness, the habitation of savages and wild beasts, become a fruitful field; [...] where wretched wigwams stood, the miserable abodes of savages, we behold the foundations of cities" (Filson: 39). What can be drawn from both medieval knights and Boone is that, to defeat the wilderness, one must partially adopt some of its features. The wild man, typically endowed with undisputed masculine raw prowess, seems to respond to a persistent urge "to give external expression [...] to the impulses of reckless physical self-assertion which are hidden in all of us, but normally kept under control" (Bernheimer 1952: 3). In this perspective, the hero defeats him either within himself or without in order to reinforce his own masculinity and sense of self. By presenting the Native American as a wild man, Filson replicates racial stereotypes that allow for the autochthonous population to be seen merely as an obstacle to overcome in the quest for the expansion of civilization, thus presenting a strongly ethnocentric perspective.

The quest structure also dramatizes, along with the relationship between civilization and wilderness, that between individual and society. In fact, while the hero undertakes an individual quest, confronting alone the forces of nature, "to serve their society is the sole object and destiny of these heroes" (Heilbrun 1973: 21).

Both in Arthurian romances and Boone's narrative, there is a double focus on the hero as an individual, exploring the psychology and the spiritual and moral growth of character, and as representative of society as a whole. Indeed, the last step of the journey is one of return to the order of civilization, regenerating and improving it thanks to the hero's experience. For Boone, his individual quest in solitude has "value only insofar as it contributes to the ultimate creation for a better society" (Slotkin 1973: 310). Similarly, "chivalry discussed in romance was an active social force, not merely a gossamer veil of escapism" (Kaeuper 2000: 98–9). Indeed, chivalric romances provided cultural models for maintaining a set of values for the ruling class, where the knight's adventure is the "means by which [courtly virtues] are proved and preserved" (Auerbach 1946: 134–35).

While the pioneer Boone has been often perceived as the bearer of civilization, in other instances he has also been portrayed as "a fugitive from civilization who could not endure the encroachment of settlements upon his beloved wilderness" (Smith 1978: 57). Timothy Flint's biography of him (1847) reflects this confusion of attitudes. Indeed, Boone appears proud to be a part of the accomplishment that "the rich and boundless valleys of the great west [...] and the paradise of hunters, had been won from the dominion of savage tribes and opened as an asylum for the oppressed, the enterprising and the free of every land" (Flint 1847: 226–7). Yet, he also laments that "the tide of emigration once more swept by the dwelling of Daniel Boone, driving off the game" (246). However, even while the pioneer himself is claimed to have manifested a discontent with civilization and a preference for a solitary life in the woods, he also seemed in the course of his life to have acquired an awareness of his historical mission. Indeed, he claimed in an interview to be "a creature of providence, ordained by heaven as a pioneer in the wilderness, to advance the civilization and the extension of his country" (Sparks 1847: 188). Thus, the image of the pioneer of the Wild West could serve both as a spokesman of nostalgic primitivism and as a champion of civilization. Yet, the vision that prevails, both historically and mythologically, is the latter, one that celebrates the advancement of progress and male-oriented civilization at the expenses of the natural

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world and the inhabitants of a land, both human and nonhuman, in the name of Providence and Manifest Destiny.

#### THE LEGACY OF FRONTIER NARRATIVES

The prevailing perception mentioned above is also confirmed by the resonance of these myth-like heroes in later literary and cultural expressions. Indeed, Filson's narrative has had a great impact on successive literary works. Among them, James Fenimore Cooper modelled Natty Bumppo "from the effigies of old Daniel Boone" (Bakeless 1823: 232). Like Filson, Cooper draws from both autochthonous sources and chivalric romances mediated by Walter Scott's historical romances. As in Boone, "[i]n Natty [...] we have a carefully crafted representation of a heroic ideal" who embodies "the notion of American exceptionalism that of course informs expansionist philosophy and the progressivist thinking of manifest destiny" (Frye 1999: 38). Bumppo became one of the most influential characters in American culture, and a precursor of figures such as Davy Crockett, Kit Carson, and Buffalo Bill. The pattern present in Arthurian romances and traced by characters such as Boone and Bumppo extends itself with numerous ramifications throughout the American literary tradition and beyond the literary sphere.

This kind of narrative, which heavily relies on medievalist tropes, has had an effect not only on the nonhuman Other, as it justified the exploitation of the wilderness in the name of progress, but also on the relation between the land and the gendered and racial Other. In this light, nature appeared as a place which could be enjoyed and exploited only by white American males. The cult of the wilderness that developed with the closing of the frontier in the 1890s, heavily relying on frontier narratives for inspiration, implied that nature was the *locus* where white middle-class members of the male sex could temporarily escape the civic world to prove their manhood and be regenerated in their strength and power, just like medieval knights. On the contrary, non-whites such as Native Americans and African Americans were associated with traits that linked them to savagery, making so that they were seen as part of that same nature that was to be conquered



and owned, with a similar treatment applied to women as well. Lawrence Buell argues:

The orthodox versions of American literary naturism [...] have been based on texts by Anglo-American males; [...] their representations of nature contain misogynist and racist elements (such as the disparagement of settlement culture as feminine, the euphemization of slavery in nostalgic plantation and frontiersman tales, the manipulation of romantic scenery in the service of a gospel of expansionism). (1995: 16)

While romanticized as a place far away from civilization and humanity, the wilderness appears as a cultural product of that very civilization, which attaches to it its desires and fears, and uses discourses about nature to include or exclude sections of the population. This mindset, nourished by the wilderness and frontier myths, perpetuates and reinforces the binary between nature and culture, wilderness and civilization, leading to distorted views of humans' place on earth, and preventing adequate intervention on environmental problems (Cronon 1996).

Medievalism, then, has been used throughout American history in numerous contexts, aimed at perpetuating the marginalization and mistreatment of nonhumans and entire sections of the population cohabiting the American territory: from the justification of the exploitation of the land and of the violence exerted on animals and native inhabitants on the part of frontiersmen seen as heroic knightly questers; the perception of women as helpless and forever in need to be saved by "our American Sir Gawain [...] who rescues fair ladies [...] riding into the sunset with the woman left behind" (Rosenthal and Szarmach 1989: 7); the romantic, pastoral pretensions of Southern plantation owners envisioning themselves as lords; to Ku Klux Klan members portraying themselves as knights and crusaders. However, far from being a phenomenon with a circumscribed effect on the past, this ideological and mythological framework that employs medievalism continues to have a lasting impact on the twenty-first century. It does not seem a coincidence that President George W. Bush's statements in reaction to 9/11 not only employed Wild West imagery, but also that of medieval crusaders: "this crusade, this war on terrorism, is going to take a while" (qtd. in Nicholas 2019: 34). Even more recently, in 2016, after his proposition of building a wall across most of the US-Mexican

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border has been ironized as 'medieval', former President Donald Trump responded that "[Democrats] say it's a medieval solution, a wall. It's true, because it worked then and it works even better now" (Gabriele, 2019).

Indeed, the notion of the frontier, while implying constant expansion, also presupposes a border for those who are not seen as protagonists in the dominant narrative. The mythical framework that identifies the American hero in the frontiersman and his evolutions in time, thus transforming history in a story, also entails that only a restricted section of Americans, that of middle-class white males, may embody the spirit of the hero. Instead, everyone else will inevitably be cast in secondary roles, such as that of the helper or the enemy to be overcome, marginalizing them as either peripheral or antagonistic to the main trajectory of the hero. In fact, the language that employs notions of honor and chivalry also implies the necessity of someone to defend against, which is often found in the racial other. This rhetoric is often sustained by claiming an Anglo-Saxon descent traceable to heroic knights of the Middle Ages. Noël Sturgeon has noticed the ongoing impact of the frontier myth in more recent times:

As the United States became involved in projecting power beyond its initial borders [...] elements of the frontier myth were extended to apply to Third World peoples and natural resources. Seeing Third World people as primitive populations [...] conceptualizing natural resources in the Global south as available to "development" and presenting ideologies of the "free market" as a narrative of inevitable and desired evolutionary progress are all ways of expanding the frontier myth to have global relevance. (2009: 82)

Furthermore, this myth was also subsumed in discourses advocating for the expansion of militarism into the "next frontier" of outer space, which rely on "a notion of space exploration as an evolutionary pinnacle, naturalizing and justifying US militarism on and off the planet." This results in environmental damage with uneven social consequences on planetary population (Sturgeon: 81). The perpetuation of the frontier myth has served then to justify constant American expansionism and neo-imperialist tendencies up until recent times, signaling the impact and legacy of the myths and narratives that lie at the nation's foundation.

Both Boone and Leatherstocking have grown to reach mythlike proportions. Their endeavors in the wilderness are also surrounded by a quality of myth, assuming, like in the case of Arthurian knights, heroic dimensions. The risk, with very real consequences on history, of the narrative they embody is that “myth buries unresolved tensions in the safety of distance. Accordingly, responsibility for the rape of the wilderness, for the genocide of the Indians, and for the aggressive expansionism of European culture belongs only to the past” and, while producing a nostalgic sentiment for a lost pastoral world, it “makes no claim on us” (Swearingen and Cutting-Gray 1992: 267). Presenting the setting forth into the wilderness in heroic terms does not alter history. Rather, it confounds its reality and the responsibility of human actions over the environment. In this perspective, environmental issues are to be regarded “not only as central to the projects of European conquest and global domination, but also as inherent in the ideologies of imperialism and racism on which those projects historically [...] depend” (Huggan and Tiffin 2010: 6). As long as the myths and stories Americans tell themselves affirm that the delight people take in nature goes hand in hand with the violence exerted upon both nonhumans and certain humans, these narratives will continue to have an influence on everyday reality. Indeed, the idea that they are relegated in the safe realm of literature ignores and forgets that the power of fiction is not confined to a reflection of reality, but is capable of refiguring the world around, and impacting its course. It is for this reason that analyzing the patterns that validate the human expansion without physical nor ethical boundaries on the environment, from the European Middle Ages to America, is more important today than ever.

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