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From Where Do You Come?: Complexity, Theology, and Paradox in the Green Knight

Edward Byrne (Liberal Arts)

Prof. Scott Rudd (English and Philosophy), Faculty
Sponsor

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With axe in one hand, holly in the other, all clothes green accented with gold, the Green Knight enters King Arthur's court. With an image of peace contrasted with an image of war and an image of mankind contrasted with an image of nature, the anonymous author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* begins to build the complex antagonist. Throughout the poem, images and symbolic actions yielding contradicting associations appear in close proximity, leaving the audience with a complex symbolic framework. By constructing the contrasting images within a unified form through the Green Knight and his true identity Bercilak, and by placing that character at the spiritual nexus of the poem, the enigmatic journey of Sir Gawain becomes clearer. For Gawain to attain the full realization of his trials, the Green Knight must enact the Christian god and Satan simultaneously.

Facing his death at the conclusion of the poem, Gawain rebukes an offer to run from his fate by proclaiming that the Lord will protect all who act in his service (*Sir Gawain* 2132-2139). Once alone, Gawain reaffirms his resolve, announcing, "By Christ, I will not cry/ ...but find good fortune by/ the grace of God alone" (2156-2159). Two possible interpretive trajectories arise from Gawain's statements. On the one hand, his Christian faith and practice can be accepted as true, at face value; on the other he can be exhaustively psychoanalyzed in an attempt to discover any potential hidden motives. A.V.C. Schmidt articulates the difference between the two as "latent content" – hidden motives – versus the "testimony of the text" – face value – and stresses particularly the explicit religious testimony of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as immutably valuable in any analysis of the poem (163). Utilizing the "testimony" interpretive lens, a clear image of Green Knight naturally develops sharing essential characteristics with two forms of Satan: the "Enemy of God" and the "Instrument of God" (160).

Two sources contribute to the association of the color green with the Devil in medieval literature: Celtic folklore relating to the underworld and Pierre Bersuire's encyclopedia *Ovidius Moralizatus*. In his analysis of *Sir Gawain and the*

Green Knight and *The Friar's Tale* by Geoffrey Chaucer, D.W. Robertson rejects any connection to the Celtic underworld in either piece, explaining that the authors would not likely have been familiar with the folklore (471), without regard, however, for the Celtic origins of *Sir Gawain*. Frequent parallels appear between the adventures of Sir Gawain and those of the Irish figure Cuchulain, who engages in a near identical beheading challenge to Sir Gawain in *Fled Bricreann*, a story originating in the ninth century C.E. (Loomis 384, Palmer 27). The green of the Celtic underworld can therefore be associated with the Green Knight. Robertson further explains that Bersuire's evaluation of the devil as a hunter of souls – who wears green, a “protective coloration,” to disarm and attract his prey as a hunter of animals would – applies to the green clad, north-country devil of *The Friar's Tale* (471-472). Coupling the green clothes, north-country dwellings, and the demeanor of the Green Knight with Gawain's explicit identification of the Green Chapel as the “devil's lair” (*Sir Gawain* 2186), A.V.C. Schmidt argues that the poem offers an “explicit double testimony of the text,” clearly identifying the Green Knight as the devil (160). Examining the relationship between confession and recognition in the poem, J.A. Burrow posits that Gawain's association of the Green Chapel with the devil forms a “false recognition,” creating dramatic tension for the true reveal that the Green Knight is Bercilak (105). However, false recognition fails to address the length of the Green Chapel's description. Ten lines of verse form Gawain's recognition, and afterward the chapel remains a strange and eerie presence, called by the narration an “abyss,” from which “a blood-chilling noise” emanates (*Sir Gawain* 2198, 2200). With overwhelming emphasis placed on Gawain's perception of the Green Chapel, the testimony of the text is clear: dark forces are at work. The hunter aspect of the “green devil” further manifests in the three hunts at Hautdesert, which the Green Knight stages while hosting Gawain under the guise of Bercilak. The Green Knight exhibits his skill as an exceptional hunter, particularly when he captures the fox. Bercilak outwits the fox – called Reynard, whose soul is explicitly mentioned – and exerts his dominance among men. Rendering an image of the Green Knight without such crucial characteristics belies his deliberate placement within the frame of commonly understood devil figures. However, the only force which saves Gawain from his fate is the Green

Knight, and as a result he must also enact another form of Satan, that of the Adversary from the Book of Job.

Rather than acting as a weapon against God, when Satan appears in the Book of Job he serves the Almighty, coming to council before the Lord and then enacting God's will (*The Hebrew Bible* 193). Specifically, he serves as catalyst to the testing of Job's faith. Schmidt postulates that Gawain's reputation as a paragon of good moral character, one who is “by far the most faultless fellow on earth” (*Sir Gawain* 2163), serves as a mirror to Job (Schmidt 165), who God extols, “none like him on earth, a blameless and upright man” (*The Hebrew Bible* 193). Each man proves his faith and virtue in the face of an otherworldly being acting on commands to test them. The Green Knight declares his purpose in King Arthur's court as one of testing the renowned knights, whose courage is widely espoused. Gawain is chosen to represent the knights in the challenge and the Green Knight, who poses as Job, is chosen to represent mankind in the challenge set forth by Satan at God's council. Furthermore, the true nature of the challenge is hidden to Gawain, which Schmidt argues can only be morally justifiable if the Lord's approves it (162). The Green Knight, though the antagonist, does not end the poem in contention with Gawain, so the deception – not revealing his inability to be killed to Gawain – aligns with the poem's ethical framework by divine providence: the primary agency of the test must be ordained by ultimately good or holy actors. Some force has brought the test of faith to Gawain, and the Green Knight acts as the instrument of that force. However, Schmidt only contends that the Green Knight enacts Satan, leaving the audience with a conundrum: Who is God?

With an image of the Green Knight as an “Instrument of God” Satan figure, with an addendum of “Enemy of God” associations, many of his contrasting elements resolve into a clearer identity. However, certain actions by the Green Knight and other factors surrounding Gawain and his challenge remain external to the Green Knight's function. The testimony of the text presents Morgan le Fay as the conspirator who not only crafted the plan the Green Knight enacts but also utilizes her magical ability to enable his victory. Additionally, her original plan only entailed frightening Guinevere literally to

death, veiled beneath the beheading game; the test of Arthur's knights is secondary. With an understanding of fairness in, and ethical justification for, Gawain's spiritual test, a force of good must necessarily spur the actions of the Green Knight.

Following Gawain's confession, the Green Knight forgives the debt Gawain owes him, spares his life, and departs without causing any harm to the knight. Following the interpretive trajectory of the Green Knight as an "Instrument of God," Bercilak enacts particular traits that mirror the actions of God in the Book of Job. Enumerated by J.A. Burrow as being within Christian penitential tradition (108-112), Gawain's confession and subsequent absolution suggests a more holy quality of the Green Knight than simply acting on God's will. Burrow draws attention to the poet's choice to not use the proper clerical term "assoil" and asserts that Gawain and the Bercilak are playacting the Catholic confession ritual for the sake of formality, that Gawain must be forgiven for his reputation as a knight (112). Burrow bases this claim in part on literary research suggesting that medieval knights maintained a loose relationship with Christianity and that identity in medieval romance is power (Besserman 226). *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, however, contains multiple overt references to Sir Gawain's Christian identity, and Gawain's stated internal conflict, as in his declaration, "By Christ, I will not cry" (2156), directly spawns from his desire to serve God colliding with his own impulse toward self-preservation. Furthermore, the language of Gawain's absolution conveys immediacy and importance. The Green Knight declares Gawain "purged, as polished and pure/ as the day you were born, without blemish or blame" (2393-2394). Bercilak demonstrates a clear authority in Gawain's penance. A.V.C. Schmidt explains the medieval conception of the Christian God is intrinsically tied to the Lord's power over life and death and to the exclusivity of that power, specifically that "the Book of Job... teaches that God, as the author of creation, has unconditional rights over his creatures" (163). Such notions of God would be familiar to the poet and his audience, and this forms the foundation for Schmidt's contention that the Green Knight must be enacting the Satan of the Book of Job. Schmidt does not explicitly rule out the idea of the Green Knight enacting God as well, but he does fail to observe key functions of the text that point towards such a

conclusion. In the initial beheading challenge, the Green Knight springs up from death, which facilitates Gawain's pact to "serve our Lord" (*Sir Gawain* 2139-2140). The Green Knight breaks that vow of Gawain's, to face death in the service of God, by sparing his life. By accepting Gawain's confession, the Green Knight adopts the "rights" designated to God alone, and exhibits a power to restore life on the literal somatic plane, and on the figurative spiritual plane. Schmidt also argues that by enacting the Instrument of God, the Green Knight "fulfills an 'adversarial' role, putting the case against man as part of God's action as judge" (160). In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, however, the analogous role of "judge" is filled by the Green Knight. If the test of Gawain's spirit is understood as an enactment of the test of Job, then the Green Knight must also be understood as serving the function of Almighty God in the exchange. Bercilak's role as both God and Satan in the enactment of the Book of Job forms the clearest evidence for his simultaneous spiritual nature. However, though complex, the Green Knight is not entirely enigmatic, as demonstrated by Lawrence Besserman. Besserman, arguing that the Green Knight cannot be fully realized as any symbol, offers that the hypostatic union of Christ as both God and Man forms the conceptual framework with which the poem's audience, both contemporary and historic, can understand the Green Knight's nature (229-230). Although Besserman refuses to directly compare the Green Knight and Jesus, the poem itself suggests a key link in the concept of hypostatic union. In an early description of the knight, his presence is articulated as "otherworldly, yet flesh and bone" (*Sir Gawain* 198). With a direct enactment of the dual presence of Christ, the poet incorporates not only the concept of hypostatic union, but the original union itself; the Green Knight exists in the physical world and in another world as well. Two key events also place the Green Knight within a transcendent context. The Green Knight's ability to rise from the dead serves as a mimetic parallel to Christ's transcendence of death, however, more crucial is the ultimate fate of the Green Knight. Following the resolution of the beheading challenge at the Green Chapel and the absolution of Sir Gawain, Gawain, "back on his mount/ now hurtles home from there" (2475-2476) back to Camelot to serve his king, while "The green knight leaves his ground/ to wander who-knows where" (2477-2478). The Green Knight, who appears from the

wilderness to begin the action of the poem and disappears into that same wilderness once the task of Sir Gawain is completed, imitates the Satan of the Book of Job:

“And the Lord said to the Adversary, 'From where do you come?' And the Adversary answered the Lord and said, 'From roaming the earth and walking about in it'” (*The Hebrew Bible* 193). That the Adversary – *hasatan* – of the Book of Job comes before God as a member of the Lord's court, implying a state of being above that of purely human, from wandering, mirrors the origins of the Green Knight and suggests that the knight, in imitation of the adversarial role, possesses divine or semi-divine qualities, and from an understanding of the hypostatic union of divine quality and human quality as suggested by the initial description of the Green Knight, Bercilak begins to inhabit a functional Christ mode, further reified by the parallel between Christ wandering the desert and the Green Knight in the wild north woods. Similar to the complicated union of monotheism with semi-divine beings such as angels and Satan in the Bible, the poet behind *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has combined a series of seemingly contrary symbols into a unified whole with God and Satan acting as one.

A number of conventions of literary and folk origin participate in the formation of the complex Green Knight, however, the theological implications and overt religious language surrounding the central conflict of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* warrant a fundamental participation of the *religious* symbology of the Green Knight's ultimate role. With the revelation that Gawain's journey challenged him spiritually rather than physically, the involvement of the ax-wielding wild man rises to pivotal importance. Manifestations of faith from the Christian narrative summon Gawain to his journey and cultivate his understanding of the journey's completion, prompted by the enactment of Christian deity roles by Bercilak, and the poet etches the struggle of human nature competing and cooperating with faith into the image of the Green Knight, a series of contrasting and dissonant parts working towards a unified whole.

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