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'þis Gome Gered in Grene': Ecocritical Notes on "Sir Gawain and the Green Night"

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Abstract: The present essay attempts to bring to attention several elements in the fourteenth-century Arthurian romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* that lend themselves to ecocritical analysis. The anonymous poet's treatment of the alternation of human and environmental settings displays an awareness of the principle of human predominance over creation that advances in two directions: aggression and stewardship. In its concern with the non-human and the environment, the poem invites an ecocritical reading in that it concentrates on an ecological setting described as a recountal of binary oppositions, such as human/non-human, inhabited/wild, hospitable/hostile, etc.
Key words: Sir Gawain, The Green Knight/Bertilak, ecocritical standpoint, binary opposition, civilization/nature.

It goes without saying that the fourteenth-century Arthurian romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is dramatically dependant on the man-nature relationship. As early as 1957, John Speirs acknowledged the importance of the non-human environment in the poem, and several scholars have since echoed his comments. Corinne J. Saunders noticed that in the poem "the contrast between the security of the court, and the discomfort and danger, real and supernatural, of the quest landscape plays a central role" (1993, p. 148), while Piotr Sadowski remarked that the quest narrative unfolds according to a pattern of repeated oscillation which displays the protagonist "alternating movement between culture and nature" relying on "periodical exposures to the forces of the unknown and subsequent reintegrations with civilization" (1996, p. 69). The poet's thematic treatment of the alternation of human and non-human settings displays an awareness that nowadays could be labeled as ecocritical; indeed, in its concern with the non-human, the poem lends itself to an ecocritical analysis in that it concentrates on an ecological setting described as a recountal of binary oppositions, such as human/non-human, inhabited/wild,

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hospitable/hostile, etc. These clusters of binary oppositions interact in a competitive manner and their former element, obviously related to human intervention upon nature, is usually privileged.

As such, the protagonist engages the wild, non-human dimensions of the surrounding world from the poem's inception and refuses to act as an interconnected element of the environment, whereas his characterological counterpart, Sir Bertilak, does not shy from constant interaction with the environment and accepts his custodianship of nature almost gracefully as proven in his entrance to Camelot and later in the hunting scenes at Hautdesert. Against the historical background of late fourteenth century, the ethical binomial Gawain-Bertilak exemplifies a dual cultural approach of nature: with Gawain, the natural element is presumably hostile and must be subdued at all cost, while with Bertilak, a man-nature consensus is desirable, where man's stewardship of nature is non-invasive, co-operative and respectful at all times.

As far as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* can be read as a piece of 'nature writing', it can be subjected to ecocritical interpretations, although medieval studies have been terribly slow in adopting ecocriticism as a working hypothesis. In general, the poem is praised for its intimate understanding of seasonal passage where the rhythmical changes in natural imagery are metaphors of human transience. Invariably, most attention is devoted to the Green Knight's symbolic rendition as an image of the uncultivated ecosystem, as a promise of renewal and fertility as well as a constant reminder that agriculture and land melioration, in their active domestication of nature, transcend human mortality. The same ecosystem, if left unchecked, may result in monstrous overgrowth, as symbolically foregrounded in the eerie post-decapitation scene and later shown in Gawain's monster-ridden journey in search of the Green Chapel. Although there appears to be a critical consensus as to the pervasiveness of the seasonal theme in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Speir, 1957, p. 219), there are critical voices for whom the Green Knight as symbol of nature is not a given fact. A.V.C. Schmidt, for instance, concedes that there is Nature in the Green Knight, but of a different [symbolic] sort: "If the Green Knight is to be considered as a type of Nature, it must be Nature understood as an analogue for the moral and spiritual life of man: a mirror of man's daily and hourly death in sin and daily and hourly resuscitation through the grace of divine forgiveness" (1987, p. 167). At the other end, William Goldhurst holds that the key to the poem's analysis is the thematic understanding of the civilization-nature binomial, of the "idea that the primitive and sometimes brutal forces of nature make known their demands to all men, even to those who would take shelter behind the civilized comforts of court life" (1958, p. 61).

The anonymous poet of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight displays a remarkable sense of space and boundaries, which is extremely appealing to ecocritical thought. In his reading of the romance, "Nature and the Inner Man in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*", William F. Woods regards nature as an outer element which is instrumental in revealing Gawain's "inner man"; the outer-inner divide "turns inward upon itself: outer and inner turn out to be versions of each other, suggesting that man

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is always already in nature, and nature, forever in him" (2002, p. 209).

As further demonstration, Woods draws a parallel between the Gawain-Green Knight initial confrontation scene and that of Perceval in Chrétien de Troyes, in order to highlight the difference in natural "roughness". Whereas Perceval is surrounded by the dead bodies of his opponents in the confrontation with his knightly enemy, Gawain is surrounded by sophisticated courtiers ready to eat their fine table courses. Perceval's enemy is described with a keen eye for the opulence of his attire, which parallels that of the cultured court. The Green Knight, on the other hand, is situated on the borderline between courtliness and the wild, which is demonstrated by the excessive amount of pilosity that covers his intimidating person. Conversely, Gawain, ripe for warriordom, sets forth on his journey through the Wirral in rich red and gold finery, only to be given a rough brown mantle when he arrives at the castle of Sir Bertilak. At Hautdesert, he enters a "space" much like the one he came from, and comes to appreciate the security it offers, but here the security is encircled by wildness, and landscape is managed with trees and moat. The interplay of coarse and refined, the continuous expansion and blurring of boundaries – nature "invades" culture and culture strikes back with instances of formal sophistication – echo the ecocritical viewpoint according to which humans, sometimes against themselves, belong to the natural environment, influencing it while in their turn being influenced by it. Humans and the natural world share a reciprocal relationship and are indissolubly interconnected through a concatenation of actions, reactions and interactions.

All along, we must bear in mind that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a Christian poem, a product of Judeo-Christian ideology, and the poet's attitude toward the non-human environment is a derivative of Christian tradition while the "equivocal attitude of the medieval Church to nature seems to be reflected in Sir Gawain's attitude" (Speirs, 1957, p. 247). It was the late classical and medieval interpretations of Scripture that shaped Western attitudes toward the environment in that the technological advancement with its dramatic ecological aftermath was a direct consequence of the theological annunciation of man as ruler over nature.

In not so many words, through its theological interpretations and ideological worldview, Western Christianity had a hand in the ecologic crisis humanity started to experience in the twentieth century (White, 1967). Since people's access to scripture in the Middle Ages meant being able to read Latin, literate Western clergy became the single authoritative source of scriptural account and interpretation to be delivered to the masses. The ample body of Christian theological writings, through selective compiling and ideological interpretations, was fine-tuned to reverberate the dominant medieval view of the non-human environment, *i.e.* Aquinian anthropocentrism. Thus, nature is no longer viewed as a subject of spiritual significance in its own right, but an object to satisfy human material and spiritual needs, or in White's own words:

> Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen. As early as the 2nd century both Tertullian and Saint Irenaeus

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> of Lyons were insisting that when God shaped Adam he was foreshadowing the image of the incarnate Christ, the Second Adam. Man shares, in great measure, God's transcendence of nature. Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions (except, perhaps, Zorastrianism), 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. (*ibid.*)

Although his ideological reading of scripture emerged victorious and shaped Western culture institutionally, Thomas Aquinas' view of nature was preceded by that of St. Francis of Assisi, which, put into historical perspective, diverged from and competed with it. Francis understands nature as something different from man, a diverse entity animated by a life of its own that man aspires to join (Patterson, 2001, p. 6). Unaffected by sin, nature functions as a realm of being which relates to God spontaneously and authentically; in the hierarchy of creation, Francis's view maintains that nature exists in a state that is closer to God than that of humanity and it ought to serve a more meaningful purpose than human exploitation (*ibid.*, p. 7). Francis's attitude toward the human-nature binary opposition did not become prevalent while his "unique sort of pan-psychism of all things animate and inanimate, designed for the glorification of their transcendent Creator" (White, *op. cit.*) remains an argument to kindle research into the historicization of our present ecological crisis. Beyond the irony that accompanies Lynn White's proclamation of Francis as patron saint of ecologists (*ibid.*), there is also certainty: the Middle Ages did produce distinct attitudes toward the natural environment, contending one another with philosophical, theological and ideological arguments. The unfolding narrative of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, as we are about to see, testifies to these attitudes.

The poet's description of Camelot during the Christmas feast establishes the paradigm of human habitation placed in stark contrast with the unruly action of the natural world, represented by the defiant apparition of the Green Knight. A residence of joy and merriment, a house of rich apparel and courtly ritual, a space where cultural sophistication attests to the human triumph over the environment, Arthur's court experiences strife at the king's own invitation, as the poet informs about the royal habit of sitting at the table only after the occurrence of something extraordinary. By deliberate choice, the poet implies, man separates himself from the non-human environment while carrying inside the seeds of crisis. The Green Knight, or nature understood as antagonist, may emerge from outside the court, but the perilous signals of imbalance come from within.

Further on, although the protagonist's quest for the Green Chapel is given relatively little attention in comparison with activities at Camelot and Hautdesert, the narrative provides telling details that signal Gawain's separation from his natural environment and pinpoint medieval attitudes toward the ecosystem. Gawain's journey North through the Wirral affords the poet the occasion to define *wilderness*:

> […] *In þe wyldrenesse of Wyrale; wonde þer bot lyte*

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Þat auþer God oþer gome wyth goud hert louied.
And ay he frayned, as he ferde, at frekez þat he met,
If þay hade herde any karp of a kny3t grene,
In any grounde peraboute, of þe grene chapel;
And al nykked hym wyth nay, þat neuer in her lyue
Þay se3e neuer no segge þat watz of suche hwez
of grene.
Þe kny3t tok gates straunge
In mony a bonk vnbene,
His cher ful oft con chaunge
Þat chapel er he my3t sene. (701-712)

Wilderness is a space directly opposed to human habitation, inhabited by creatures that have no love for God or humankind. In the fourteenth century, the Wirral was an unsettled region covered with thick forests, a representative of land relatively unaffected by human habitation and this setting is chosen as the stage for the protagonist's confrontation with the elemental forces of the natural world. The poet's choice of verb (*werez*-'wars') is indicative of Gawain's attitude toward the environment and can be translated as both defense against attack and organized warfare whereas the non-human opponents that plague Gawain's route are archetypal images of natural hostility toward human civilization: worms (meaning 'serpents'/ 'dragons'), wolves, trolls, bulls, bears, boars and giants. The opposition between human habitation and wilderness is reinforced by Gawain's dual image of representative of human civilization and intruder respectively. At this point in the narrative, the poet operates with binaries and opposes those who serve God and those who don't. That Gawain emerges victorious as a member of the privileged group stands for the Aquinian theological position toward nature: in biblical terms, man, with divine mandate, has conquered nature.

The elemental forces – wild beasts, monstrous creatures, harsh weather and adverse landscape – concur to make Gawain's quest impossible and almost succeed. It is only after he conjures divine agency, praying to Virgin Mary and crossing himself three times, that Hautdesert miraculously appears before his eyes. Keeping faith (in God and in man's civilizing mission, presumably) provides salvation from the hostile environment. The castle's providential appearance proves the poet's thesis: wild nature puts man as representative of civilization in mortal danger; the domination of the former provides the physical salvation of the latter through civilized habitation.

Although the protagonist's journey is dramatic enough to feature as a first-rank episode in the quest, merely seventy-one lines (three stanzas) are allotted to its narration, signaling Gawain's transition from a non-civilized setting to cultivated habitation. As expected, humans occupy a privileged position in the relationship with the ecosystem; ideally, this relationship is reciprocal in that the environment influences human existence and humans strive to alter the environment. On ecocritical premises, Gawain's journey is only too brief because it reinforces the protagonist's utter divorce from his environment, wherein there is no harmonious coexistence but fierce strife, as long as he, as agent of

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civilization, regards wild nature as a barrier between two inhabited spaces (Camelot and Hautdesert) that has to be removed. The description of the castle, with its meadow, spiked palisade, adjoined park and protective moat, reinforces the author's firm belief that man belongs in a tightly-controlled habitation, in a space that limits the influence of the non-human environment by physically altering it.

In his reading of the poem, P. Sadowski notes that "nature complements culture as shadow complements light to form the whole of reality, and in *Sir Gawain* this other, complementary side of things is represented topographically by the wilderness of North Wales, and the bleak surroundings of the Green Chapel" (*op. cit*., p. 68-9). Similarly, the Green Knight/Bertilak persona shares a light-shadow relationship of complementarity with the title hero, in his conscious blurring of the binary opposition extant in Gawain's interactions with the environment. It goes without saying that the Green Knight stands for the natural environment situated outside human habitation and his defiant entry into Arthur's festive hall sets the natural world and human civilization on a collision course.

Humankind and nature conjoin in his person by the agency of Morgan le Fay's magic; civilization and wilderness conspire to create the Bertilak/Green Knight hybrid character whose main functional attribute is to destabilize the boundary between civilization and wilderness. In the Green Knight, nature trades passive alterity for active involvement, signaling a paradigm switch, as noted by Michael W. George:

> By presenting the Green Knight as the other, the entrance into Arthur's hall assumes added meaning, blurring the line between nature and civilization. Rather than confronting nature on a quest, as Gawain does, the court must confront nature within civilization. In an instant, the binary opposition of civilization/wilderness ceases. The wilderness has entered Camelot. (2010, p. 37)

In Camelot, the Green Knight functions as a destabilizing agent; back on familiar ground, at the Green Chapel, he becomes a purveyor of truth, of the ultimate knowledge that "there is life inexhaustible at the roots of the world even in the dead season", that there is "within the antagonism between man and nature, between the human and the other-than-human, a hidden harmony" (Speirs, *op. cit*., p. 221), the kind of which is exquisitely exemplified by Sir Bertilak of Hautdesert, the Green Knight's human alter-ego.

Bertilak bestrides humanity and wilderness and his actions are carefully conducted to bridge the gap between the two. Nowhere is this more evident than in the way the poet juxtaposes the hunt scenes – the wild and the domestic – that occur in Hautdesert. Both Gawain and Sir Bertilak display attitudes toward the non-human environment that echo the Aquinian thesis of man's precedence over nature in divinely established hierarchy. Whereas Gawain is driven by an almost "militaristic antagonism" (George, *op. cit*., p. 39) toward nature in his confrontation with the elemental forces that prevent him from reaching the Green Chapel, the master of Hautdesert approaches the natural environment differently, carefully managing the non-human, in an attitude

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that closely resembles stewardship (*ibid.*). For instance, the three hunts that regulate the exchange of winnings between host and guest are clearly conducive of ecocritical standpoints. Firstly, Sir Bertilak forbids the hunting of male deer; several does are hunted to be served as food at the festive table during a process resemblant of contemporary ecology in its restraint, frugality and humaneness. The ritualistic manner in which the deer trophy is presented to Gawain elevates the wild animal through ceremonial treatment and shows respect for the hunted beast.

Secondly, unlike the non-human forces that threaten Gawain in his quest, which are not individualized during the protagonist's martial exploit, the other two animals – the wild boar and the fox – are put into fictional context and become characters in the poem. The boar, the poet informs us, is an immense solitary boar which had left the herd many years ago on account of his age, and the hunters approach him with caution and respect. Similarly, the fox, named *Reniarde* (Reynard) in the tradition of medieval beast fables, is believed to have possessed a soul, at whose passing the hunters blow their bugles ceremoniously and respectfully. Although characterized by the hunting party with the traditional attributes of the fox (*þef*-thief and *schrewe*-villain), Reynard is granted a soul, an attribute typically associated with humans: this narrative detail bespeaks the poet's Neoplatonic creed and epitomizes the harmony in which his characters coexist with nature, giving weight to the ecocritical viewpoint.

Ultimately, the opinion the medieval audience may have had toward the blurring of the human-environmental boundary is hard to ascertain. While this essay is not a detailed analysis of medieval attitudes toward the environment, it nonetheless gives added emphasis to the process of co-adaptation extant in the reciprocal relationship between the realm of nature and the realm of culture, as well as to the fact that by late fourteenth century the "idea of stewardship was, indeed, an available approach to the natural world" (ibid.). If the anonymous poet was aware of the binary opposition between human and non-human, it is then safe to assume that the competing attitudes of Gawain and Bertilak/The Green Knight toward the uncultivated environment (aggression vs. stewardship) encapsulate a medieval standpoint whose philosophical, theological and ideological rationale foreshadows the contemporary ecocritical debate.

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