“A ‘Fuck You’ to the French:” Atrocious Autochthony in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

Siddhartha Minhas, Simon Fraser University

Abstract
This paper was originally written for Professor Coley’s English 209 course *Race, Borders, and Empire*. The assignment asked students to present our reading of a cultural or ethnic collision in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The paper uses MLA citation style.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a deeply rich poem that comprises layers upon layers of nuanced and cultural motifs. Within it is the struggle against colonial, autochthonous, and cosmopolitan forces, springing forth from folkloric myth and religious narratives. This paper explores those motifs in a way that illuminates the cultural clashes of Medieval Britain, France, and even glimpses beyond European hegemony, to the possibilities of the East.

Amidst the Middle Ages came the Alliterative Revival: a sudden explosion around 1350 to 1450 that featured a resurgence in alliterative verse. Commonly associated with the English midlands, it followed a French aristocratic dominance. This traditionally English identity uniquely manifests in the manuscript: *Cotton Nero A.X* in that it is the sole verse form. The poet of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* hence, among other reasons, seems interested in British history. Hailing from the Northwestern Midlands of England, the traditionally transfixed poet paints the Green Knight’s figure to be natively autochthonous in nature in order to resuscitate his ideology of Brythonic culture in King Arthur’s corrupt and cosmopolitan, yet colonising court.

As Rhonda Knight so devastatingly details in her article, there was very much a colonial relationship between Wales and England (268–72). She goes on to suggest representatives of this Anglo-Welsh border in the poem, such as

"Bertilak's role as a border lord, who holds the border with whales" and his Green Knight persona's physical description suggesting "the otherworldliness of Wales" (272). Identifying the parallel between the poetic Arthurian court in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the historical court of King Edward II, she shows their mobile, metropolitan culture: how King Edward II's court spent considerable time in the North and Northwest Midlands, and how it was imagined as "England's ideological center, and the locus from whence came diplomacy, fashion, and literature" (265–6). But I would go so far as to call this kind of court cosmopolitan, despite its colonising disposition, because of foreign elements to which I will soon return.

Immediately, the concern the poet has for what truly constitutes Britishness becomes apparent. From the very first line, the reader witnesses how he instantiates King Arthur to descend from Trojan truth. He describes how "fer over the French flod Felix Brutus / On mony ful broad Bretayn he settez with wynne" (lines 13–5). He notably skips over France, which Professor Coley supposes to be "a 'fuck you' to the French" ("Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Fitt 1 & 2"). While the poet illustrates Britain to have Trojan heritage through *translatio studii et imperii*, and thus illustrates the same of the British king Arthur, he also exemplifies the link between native Brythonic folklore and diasporic cultural conquest. It is here that emerges the first glimpse of his intention to recodify the Celtic court with his Indigenous culture.

He gives the reader his corrupted conception of the Arthurian court. Planting a seed of a childishness, the poet describes the "...flower of youth / in the hall" (lines 54–5) and Arthur as "boyish" (line 86). If Arthur is not "told / [a] curious tale about some perilous thing, / Of some great wonder that he could believe / Of princes, of battles, or other marvels," like a child at the dinner table, "he [will] never eat" (lines 91–5). Moreover, the poet depicts the excessive decadence of the court. With "[d]ouble helpings of food… served on the dais," and "[excited argument] over [New Year's] gifts," the poet interweaves into the extravagant image the fine materials adorning Queen Guenevere, including "silk," "gems," and importantly, "a canopy overhead / Of costly French fabric" (lines 61–77). All while infantilising the round table and depicting its excessive expenditure, the poet enmeshes its frivolity with its, as hinted to earlier in this paper, foreign — French — influence, something the English court had been permeated with since the Anglo-Norman conquest of 1066. It is this critical attitude the poet bears unto cosmopolitan culture that manifests his Celtic icon.

Thence, as the Green Knight appears, so too does the contradictory motifs and ideologies he symbolises. And as Rhonda Knight points out, the Green Knight's description embodies both otherworldly characteristics of the provincial Anglo-Wales border, and the fashionable attire of the dominant, centralised metropolitan court (264–5). He exudes a "wildness" that she believes to be his "primary aspect," juxtaposed to what she deems to be his courtly "drag" (274–5). Such performative drag, she argues, mocks the court's culture, rather than emulating it, challenging racial and class lines: she quotes Carole-Anne Taylore to condense this idea: "one 'does' ideology in order to undo it, producing knowledge about it" (275). In this way, the Green Knight serves as the incarnation of the poet's critical view, a view of a corrupted court in need of a reminder as to what it should Britishly be.

The autochthonous nature of the Green Knight is clear as soon as he appears in the fourth and final fitt. The ancient Greek idea of being born from the earth shows when the Green Knight shows himself "bursting out of a hole" in the ground (line 2221), just like how those mythological people do from a Serpent's teeth, supposedly populating Thebes. Thus sprouts a birth motif. This autochthonous, and thereby Indigenous — which, incidentally, is the word *autochtone* in French — nature lends itself to his appearance. Romanticising the Knight, the poet paints the natural green of the character to be as "astound[ing]" to the court as the rest of his "equally elegant" body (145–50). In fact, amidst the "sparkling rain" on "smiling plains where flowers unfold," the "open fields and woodlands put on green dress" (lines 500–8). Here, the same green that dresses the Green Knight is the "green dress" of this pastoral nature. And before any other interaction occurs, King Arthur invites in this beautiful and pastoral otherworldliness with open arms: "Wyghe, welcum iwys to this place, / The hede of this ostel Arthour I hat; Lyght lufych adoun and lenge, I the praye…" (252–4). This kind of acceptance the cosmopolitan court bears unto outsiders is exactly what the poet seeks to rectify.

In response, the autochthonous Green Knight, calling those of the court "beardless children" (line 280) issues his challenge (lines 285–300). And when no one accepts, he mocks the Frenchified court for not holding up to the famous standard of the Indigenous Arthurian folklore that they represent. He asks:

> What, is this Arthur's house? …
> That everyone talks of in so many kingdoms?
> Where are now your arrogance and your victories,
> Your fierceness and your wrath and your great speeches"

SFU LIBRARY DIGITAL PUBLISHING

Now the revelry and the repute of the Round Table
Are overthrown with a word from one man's mouth,
For all of you cower in fear before even a blow has been struck!

Then he laughs so uproariously that the king took offence (lines 309–16). This contempt for the Arthurian court, for its supposed corruption by foreign French customs, is clear. Thus, his contemptuous challenge dares Sir Gawain, "the chosen representative of the Arthurian court" (Jost 136) to seek him out in his Green Chapel so that he may deal him a blow in return. Strikingly, this results in a border crossing (lines 697–99). According to Rhonda Knight, as the community garnishes Gawain with chivalric armour, they also communally transform him into their cultural icon. As a "cultural collage," like the Green Knight is for the Brythonic Anglo-Welsh region (261), Sir Gawain serves to project his community's dominant, colonial court, voyaging off into Indigenous Celtic region (277). But in order to remember the Brythonic culture his court ought to embody, the poem has Sir Gawain retrieve what is supposedly true to its original Celtic myth: the green girdle.

Ironically, this very same Frenchified courtly culture for which Sir Gawain stands becomes his undoing. The Lady finally succeeds in getting Gawain to accept her green girdle (lines 1846–65). After she fractures his identity by questioning it (Knight 279–80), he succumbs to his fear and foregoes his chivalric code. The green girdle, as Rhonda Knight discerns, is a Welsh cultural artefact that is interwoven into Gawain's ideological icon (282). Such supports the poet's wish to recodify Arthurian civilisation. The setting where this happens is a courtly one, too, filled with as much aristocratic courtesy as Gawain's is back home. And as the translator James Winny vitally notes, the French language is still very much alien to the poet and his Northwestern audience, thus when it comes about in the courtly manners between Gawain and the hostess — "of alle chivalry to chose, the chef thyng alosed / Is the lel layk of luf, the lettrure of armes" (lines 1512–3) — the poet contrasts it with his "natural" and "bare" narrative style through his native Middle English dialect (Winny viii). Here again resurfaces the fiendishly foreign of the English court the poet isolates through deliberate diction, thereby subduing Gawain.

In between the seduction scenes and the wild external hunting scenes of Bertilak and his men, the poet demonises yet another foreign French element. The final scene, which features the —literally — sly fox named Renard, who repeatedly outwits the hunters, parallels indeed to the Lady's success in tricking Sir Gawain (lines 1846–65). To explain, *Reynard the Fox* was an incredibly popular

figure in European folklore during the Middle Ages detailing a "facetious rustic life" and the "triumph of craft over brute strength" ("Reynard the Fox"). His main literary tradition was from France: *Roman de Renart*, and he was so popular there, in fact, that the official French word for a fox, *goupil*, came to be replaced by the character's name "renart," which lingers even today ("Reynard the Fox"). So, this Lady is demonised not only by Gawain's misogynistic outburst later (lines 2414–28), but also by this paralleled Renard. The way he "[c]reeps stealthily… / Thinking to escape from the wood and hounds by his wiles" (lines 1710–1) reveals a fiendishly foreign streak with which the poet compares the Lady.

In this text also lies aesthetic ideologies of skin tone, betraying more racial and cultural bias. The first glimpse of this skin aesthetic is what the courtiers see of the Green Knight's neck while Sir Gawain decapitates it: the only part of him vividly imagined as something other than green, just so happens to be "white flesh," which makes way for his "handsome head" to be sent flying (lines 425–7). The poet further beautifies white skin when he juxtaposes two ladies at Bertilak's court. Specifically, he mentions how Bertilak's wife, the "beautiful" one, is "the loveliest on earth in complexion and features, / In figure, in colouring and behaviour above all others, / And more beautiful than Gunevere, it seem[s] to the knight" (lines 943–5). Meanwhile, "the other one [is] withered… / [and] rough wrinkled cheeks [hang on her] in folds" (lines 951–3). Significantly, he emphasises the "colouring" of these women as he portrays their beauty. He depicts the young one's "breast and white throat, uncovered and bear, / [shining] more dazzling[ly] than snow new-fallen on hills" (lines 955–6). The poet thus evokes an ideological beauty rooted in her whiteness. In contrast, the poet disfigures the other's phenotypes, her "swarthy" complexion and "black brows," calling them "repulsive to see" (lines 958–63). Notably, such dark phenotypes are found more frequently in France, with its region being farther south than Britain and more Mediterranean. found Therefore, the poet conflates dark features with ugliness to racialise beauty, something that further suggests his xenophobic attitude, an attitude he bears unto the cosmopolitan court.

In the end, the culturally Brythonic Green Knight turns out to be well received. He grants Gawain the Celtic green girdle as a token of friendship, which he in turn "gratefully" accepts (lines 2389–442). Rhonda Knight argues this fails. The Arthurian court laughs at Gawain's story and although they accept it, they culturally appropriate it (282–4). The symbolic Welsh artefact is dissociated from its cultural truth and redefined according to the court's identity (282–4). They assimilate it as "an icon of fellowship", continuing the colonial metropolitan

SFU LIBRARY DIGITAL PUBLISHING

culture critiqued so heavily by the poet, just as they have done from the start when they saw nothing but entertainment in the Green Knight's entrance (282–4). The final line of the poem's manuscript, in Anglo-Norman French, is the motto of the Order of the Garter founded by King Edward III: *HONI SOYT QUI MAL PENCE* "[shamed be whoever thinks ill of it]," which possibly suggests who had this poem commissioned (Coley). It also reflects this carefree sentiment of the contemporary aristocracy.

This is what I see as a failure of Bertilak to recentre the Arthurian court in what he believes to be true British culture, but also a failure of the court to change from their cosmopolitan yet colonising ways. Which path of progression would have been the most moral? The fruit of accepting the cross-cultural connections of Medieval texts like this one, however, is the exciting opportunities of exploration for which it creates a path, a path already beginning to be paved by those connections found between the Green Knight and the Arabian, folkloric figure of Al-Khidr, and by articles like Ananda K. Coomaraswamy's that draws parallels with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Indian folklore, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: Indra and Namuci."

SFU LIBRARY DIGITAL PUBLISHING

References

Coomaraswamy, Ananda K. 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: Indra and Namuci'. *Speculum*, vol. 19, no. 1, Jan. 1944, pp. 104–25. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, https://doi.org/10.2307/2856858.

Coley, David. Personal interview. 30 November 2022.

Coley, David. "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Fitt 1 & 2." English 209: Race, Borders, and Empire, 12 October 2022, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC. Lecture.

Jost, Jean E. "Border Boundaries in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: The Time and the Place of the Crime." *Medieval Perspectives*, pp. 135–154.

Knight, Rhonda. 'All Dressed Up with Someplace to Go: Regional Identity in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'. *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2003, pp. 259–84. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.2003.0043.

"Reynard the Fox." Edited by The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 20 July 1998, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Reynard-the-Fox-literary-character.

The Gawain Poet. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.* Translated and edited by James Winny, Broadview Press, 1992.

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. I also give permission for the Student Learning Commons to publish all or part of my essay as an example of good writing in a particular course or discipline, or to provide models of specific writing techniques for use in teaching. This permission applies whether or not I win a prize, and includes publication on the Simon Fraser University website or in the SLC Writing Contest Open Journal.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

© Siddhartha Minhas, 2022

Available from: https://journals.lib.sfu.ca/index.php/slc-uwc

SFU LIBRARY DIGITAL PUBLISHING