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ENGL 401

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That Which Binds Us: Nationality in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

Literary works often reflect the social and political environments of the times during which they are written, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is no exception. Written sometime between 1350 and 1400, the poem was composed during a period in which England was violently attempting to conquer Wales (Arner 79). In her article “The Ends of Enchantment: Colonialism and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” Lynn Arner asserts that the poem is steadfastly supportive of England’s conquest. She argues for a very distinct “us versus them” mentality in regards to the poem, with King Arthur and Gawain representing the English and Morgan le Fay and the Green Knight representing the Welsh. While I do agree that the poem has very clear undertones pertaining to the conquest of Wales, I do not support the notion that the poem is so divisive. Rather, I will argue that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* demonstrates an attempt to blur the lines between these two factions of people that outwardly appear to be far more different than they really are.

Arner asserts that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*’s depiction of Wales as an unfamiliar frontier teeming with danger, coupled with its small number of known inhabitants, is a clear example of a mindset of English superiority (Arner 84). Furthermore, she argues that the poem “instructs audience members to understand themselves to be a superior form of humanity to the Welsh and therefore entitled to dominate them” (Arner 85). However, this is not consistent with neither the poem’s portrayal of Bertilak nor his ornate castle. When Gawain first sets his eyes upon Bertilak’s castle, the poem claims that “[a] better barbican that burne blushed upon never”

(*SGGK* 793). This indicates that Gawain, a member of the illustrious court of King Arthur, is more impressed by Bertilak's castle than he is of Arthur's own. Being that King Arthur is such a widely revered character in English literature during this time period, it does not speak to the theme of English supremacy to have Arthur's own castle outshone by that of a unnamed (at this moment in the poem) Welsh lord.

Taking this point even further, the very presence of such an estate challenges the stark divide between the English and the Welsh that Arner argues for. She states that the Welsh "frontier is a primitive terrain that has yet to develop into a cultivated region resembling Arthur's kingdom" (Arner 86). While it is indeed true that Gawain does not come across any other signs of civilization, the mere existence of Bertilak's castle in such an otherwise unforgiving environment is very significant. Rather than drive a further wedge between the English and the Welsh, I argue that it instead draws a parallel between them. It asserts that the difference between these two groups of people is purely based on where they live, and the notion of superiority simply by the virtue of being born in England instead of Wales is demonstrated to be untrue. Despite living in an environment that the poem describes as bringing "peryl and payne and plytes ful harde" (*SGGK* 733), Bertilak manages to establish an estate that rivals those that Gawain has seen in England. As such, it is clear that living in such a dangerous and savage place has not rendered these people incapable of living civilized lives. Despite the circumstance of where he lives, Bertilak demonstrates that he is nevertheless able to keep up with a sophisticated way of life, dismantling the notion of the barbaric, untamed Welsh.

The characterization of Bertilak, and by extension that of his alter ego of the Green Knight, displays yet another contradiction between the concept of the Welsh as savages that need to be civilized and their role in the poem. As he outwardly presents himself to the rest of the

world, Bertilak appears to be a refined gentleman, welcoming Gawain with unrivaled hospitality. Just as Gawain found himself in awe upon stumbling upon such an estate, Bertilak, as well as the other men in his castle, are equally as impressed with Gawain for being a member of Arthur's court. Furthermore, Bertilak's men wish to learn from Gawain, exclaiming, "Now schal we semlych se sleghetes of thewes / And the teccheles termes of talkyng noble, [...] / That such a gest as Gawan grauntez us to have, / When burnez blythe of burthe schal sitte and synge" (*SGGK* 916-922). While Arner does indeed argue for the English educating and civilizing the Welsh, as is suggested here, she does so under the notion of conquest (Arner 91-92). As such, this implies that such an education would be forced, and not a reciprocal relationship as is depicted here. In the case of Gawain in Bertilak's castle, the reader is presented with a group of openminded men willing to learn from a foreign man due to genuine interest and fascination. Rather than an antagonistic relationship as would be demonstrated by education through conquest, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* displays people from different backgrounds coming together and reaching a mutual understanding.

This understanding is further exemplified through the presence of the Green Knight, whom Arner regards as an evil and antagonistic figure (Arner 88-89). However, I will contest that notion, as by the conclusion of the poem, it is clear that the Green Knight is not to be regarded as a villain at all. The Green Knight does not represent evil and enmity; rather, he is a symbol of the wild and the unknown, quite similar to the poem's depiction of the Welsh terrain. And yet, despite his portrayal as a man who represents all that is untamed about Wales, he is nevertheless one and the same with Bertilak himself, a man of extreme hospitality and civility. To argue that the Green Knight is truly an enemy of England as Arner does merely accounts for his superficial appearance. While I do concede that his challenging of Arthur's court during a

Christmas celebration was unorthodox and certainly unexpected by those in attendance, that act alone does not mark him as an evil character. Rather, his character has further depth that displays how truly similar he is to Gawain beneath the surface. Like Gawain and the other knights, the Green Knight places high value on honor and chivalry: “Thou art confessed so clene, beknowen of thy mysses, / And hatz the penaunce apert of the poynt of myn egge, / I halde the polysed of that plyght, and pured as clene / As thou hadez never forfeled sythen thou watz fyrst borne” (*SGGK* 2391-2394). In this instance, the Green Knight is expressing mercy, expecting Gawain to do no more than make up for his past wrongdoings. Rather than portraying him as a savage, he is presented as having a strong moral code, as well as great respect for Gawain both for fulfilling his end of the challenge and for admitting when he was wrong. Despite the vast difference in size and appearance, the Green Knight and Gawain are presented as possessing strikingly similar values. As such, the Green Knight does not represent the barbarity of the Welsh; rather, he represents the notion that perhaps the most outwardly different things about groups of people are not what truly define them.

Arner continues her assertion of English dominance over Wales through the narrative of Christianity, noting that “the Welsh borderland needs a stronger Christian influence” (Arner 86). Here, she claims that Gawain represents the side of Christianity and the Green Knight on the side of paganism, due to his relationship with Morgan le Fay. However, despite the curse that she has placed on him, Bertilak appears to be a man of faith. For example, prior to returning the blow to Gawain, the Green Knight says, “God the mot loke!” (*SGGK* 2239), indicating that he believes that God truly is watching over Gawain. While Morgan le Fay is certainly not a Christian figure, that does not mean that such an association need be extended to Bertilak as well, as the poem creates a clear distinction between her wishes and his own. As such, the poem suggests that the

views of those at the top of society, Morgan le Fay in Bertilak's case, do not necessarily reflect those of the people below them. This challenges the Anglocentric portrayal of the beloved King Arthur, reminding the audience that English society is not indicative of the rest of the world.

While *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* certainly does draw attention to distinctions between the English and the Welsh, it does so in ways that draw further attention to their similarities. In spite of these differences of home, origin, and appearance, Gawain and Bertilak are revealed to have strikingly similar values, both in regards to how they carry themselves as knights and how they lead their private lives at home. The poem does not demonstrate clear support of English superiority nor Welsh savagery. The Green Knight, while appearing monstrous and brutal upon first glance, is revealed to not only hold a high code of honor but also acts as the head of a civilized and refined castle where the English Gawain is able to make himself feel quite at home. The poem does not conclude with conflict; rather, it concludes with two men coming to a mutual understanding.

## Works Cited

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