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There's No Success Like Failure and Failure's No Success at All: An Analysis of the Role of Free Agency in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

There seems to be a common thread in much of the critical literature surrounding SGGK that the Green Knight's test was designed to expose the inherent weakness or absurdity of the Arthurian court's chivalric code. Because, while it is a highly artificial and regulated code of conduct, not unlike the rules of a game, the constant necessity for the knights to apply it in real life and be this image of knightly perfection can have very real consequences and force its adherents into tricky and otherwise avoidable situations.

And so it is said to go for Gawain who finds himself in the somewhat absurd dilemma of having to choose between keeping his word or keeping his head. But is it really just Gawain's strict adherence to chivalric virtue that landed him in this impossible position? While it does highlight many of the knights' ideological inconsistencies, the poem does not immediately strike one as being such a straightforward indictment of them. Are knights really any more foolish than any other person for following this set of rules? Be it chivalric virtue, God, wealth, or some obscure pagan deity, we all worship and obey something. We are all in a way following some sort of social norms or commands, and much of what we think is often dictated by our positionality. It is very difficult to completely extricate oneself from such a code of conduct or to do away with these guiding principles entirely, because to transcend one's belief systems would require transcending one's positionality, which is no small feat.

The poem invites the reader to consider the importance of these social codes of conduct, and what remains of a person when they are removed from the equation. How much of our thinking is our own? How much of it is predetermined? Is there any room for free agency and independent thought, or are we, without all these social constructs guiding us, creatures of pure instinct? It is interesting to consider how the narrative explores these questions as it can be interpreted in a number of different ways. Is it and the Green Knight's test meant to reveal the importance of thinking for oneself or to show that to do so is actually impossible?

One's interpretation of what is being tested here says much of how one perceives the Green Knight's effectiveness as a "tester" figure, and which aspect of his dual nature—that of the "familiar" knight or of the otherworldly ogre—best brings out in Gawain and the court that which he is trying to expose. For example, Tom McAlindon in 1965 argued that the poem's supernatural elements create an otherworldly scenario for which allows the exploration of how the knights behave outside the codified and familiar realm of the court, while Manish Sharma in 2008 pointed out how the Christmas *gomen* was actually always meant to elicit a specific chivalric response, a response fueled by what Victoria Weiss described in her 1976 reading of the poem as the court's underlying culture of violence, and that thus exposes chivalry's thin veneer of valour.

Weiss is indeed correct in her assessment of the court's chivalric culture and longstanding tradition of violence (after all, Fitt 1 does open on a decadent banquet capping off 15 days of dangerous jousts and tournaments, which is an unconventional way of celebrating Christmas, to say the least), and how it is the Green Knight as a knight and not as some otherworldly being who taps into this the most effectively with his taunts questioning their

valour, such as when he calls the knights “berdlez chylder” (280)[1] with “myghtez so wayke” (282), or their reputation when he says

> “What, is this Arthures hous?...
> “That al the rous rennes of thurgh ryalmes so mony?
> Where is now your sourquydrye and your conquestes,
> Your gryndellayk and your greme, and your grete words?
> Now is the revel and the renoun of the Rounde Table
> Overwalt with a worde of on wyghes speche,
> For al dares for drede without dynt schewed!” (309-315).

He frames his taunts in a language that they can recognize, and speaks them dressed in an attire that is familiar to the knights. When they look at the Green Knight, they think they see a challenger they’ve encountered many times before. But by thinking that he is yet another warrior looking to make a name for himself by challenging the greatness of the court, who’s come looking for “batayl bare” (277), they’ve already entered this exchange of blows with lethal intent. Because they think they know what to expect of this challenger, they fail to recognize the true nature of his challenge.

But with respect to Weiss, the true purpose of this challenge is not, as she seems to imply, to reveal through Gawain’s failure to resist the temptation to behead the Green Knight how the court does not really worship the chivalric virtues of valour and honour, but rather the violence, aggressiveness, and bloodlust behind which they lazily hide. This idea that the court’s penchant for violence or Arthur’s desire to witness “sum mayn mervayle” (94) turned what could have potentially just been a harmless exchange of swats of the holly branch into a far deadlier

[1] All quotations from Sir Gawain and the Green Knight are taken from the Broadview Anthology of British Literature.

exchange of beheadings overlooks, as Sharma points out, why the Green Knight showed up to Camelot in the first place, that he was sent by Morgan le Fay

> …upon this wyse to your wynne halle
> For to assay the surquidré, yif hit soth were
> That rennes of the grete renoun of the Rounde Table.
> Ho wayned me this wonder your wyttez to reve,
> For to have greved Gaynour and gart hir to dyghe
> With glopnyng if that ilke gome that gostlych speked
> With his hede in his honde before the hyghe table (2456-2462).

The test cannot be, as Weiss claims, one of Gawain's inconsistent value of human life (either by caring too little for that of the Green Knight's in the banquet hall or too much for his own in the Green Chapel), whose success or failure depends on whether he strikes a lethal blow or not if it was, as Bertilak says above, all orchestrated by Morgan le Fay. She was never interested in seeing whether he would strike the lethal blow, but in fact counting on it, because

> it is not only the case that [she] sent the Green Knight to Camelot to test the mettle of the assembled knights and to deprive them of their senses, it is also the case that she planned to kill Guinevere by terrifying her with the sight of the Green Knight speaking through his decapitated head. But if Morgan had intended to kill Guinevere in this way all along, why is there any leeway in the terms of the covenant, thrice repeated, that the Green Knight puts forward? Why is Gawain allowed to choose the nature of the blow he will inflict and the implement with which he will inflict it? … the Green Knight's decapitation was (apparently) a part of Morgan's plan before the fact. The stroke that Gawain aims at the Green Knight's neck, according to this narrative exigency, is at once voluntary and foreordained (Sharma 168).

It was never a test of Gawain's free agency or about revealing how overly devoted he is to the chivalric code, but a test of the code itself. From the moment he barges into the banquet hall on horseback (an intentional marker of disrespect towards Arthur), the Green Knight is

seeking to rile the court up in order to trigger a predetermined and specifically chivalric reaction. By taking on the form of a knight, insulting the court's pride and reputation, by "[Letting] the naked nec to the note schewe" (420) and appealing to the bloodlust baked into their code, he is doing just as he was ordered to by le Fay. He is depriving the knights of their wits (or individual rationality) by encouraging them to slide back into this "chivalric auto-pilot" and to let their code of conduct do all their thinking for them.

The momentum of this regression then carries Gawain through the motions of his ensuing journey, dictating how he interacts with the many obstacles he faces. As he ventures beyond Camelot and into the wilderness, he is increasingly immersed into the unknown and therefore increasingly deprived of his senses, which compels him to lean even more on the crutch of his chivalric auto-pilot. For example, in Hautdesert he is so preoccupied with trying to be a good, chaste knight by resisting the Lady Bertilak's untoward sexual advances of or rather his own genuine lust for this married woman, that he is too distracted to properly engage with, and thus fails, the 'girdle test'. On his last day at Hautdesert he is so proud to tell the Lady that he has no mistress and has resisted her only out of devotion to the Virgin Mary, but this, she says, is "a worde… that worst is of alle" (1792), which allows her to put herself in the position of the injured party and guilt Gawain into at least accepting a love-token on her behalf, in this case the girdle.

By trying so hard to be the most perfect knight, he forgets to use his own head and plays effortlessly into his testers' hands. But that is the point of this test, that ideology can only take one so far. It is an imperfect guiding principle for it cannot reconcile or smooth over all of life's many contradictions, and if you choose to rely solely on it to dictate your actions then you will inevitably find yourself in needlessly complicated, and often absurd, dilemmas. And in the end,

that is why Bertilak is so quick to forgive Gawain the man for Gawain the knight's failings. For they were not truly his fault, but rather those of the ideology he so desperately clung to. He as an individual had very little to do with any of it, and so "the lasse I yow blame" (2368).

But as effective as the Green Knight's appearance as a knight may be in exposing the flaws of rigid chivalric conduct, one must not discount the importance of his green otherworldliness and what it reveals about the poem's characters either. It could be argued that this otherworldly interruption of an otherwise familiar setting by the sorceress le Fay offers "a highly flexible narrative environment where an idealism much at variance with the orthodoxy of the age could be given free development" (McAlindon 122), i.e., the arrival of the Green Knight plunges the court into new, uncharted waters, into a scenario that the chivalric code of conduct cannot account for nor provide instruction against. It is in effect removed from the equation, and judging by the knights' inert initial reaction to this green creature's arrival, they are nothing without it. Indeed,

> For fele sellyez had thay sen, bot such never are;
> Forthi for fantoun and fayryye the folk there hit demed.
> Therfore to answare watz arghe mony athel freke,
> And al stouned at his steven and stonsil seten (239-242).

The knights are so without bearing here that they even commit the discourtesy of letting King Arthur address the Green Knight first, even though the knightly thing to do would have been not to allow him to waste his time or breath on this impetuous challenger. Without their ideology to tell them how to react, these men retreat either into complete inertia or unthinking, animal impulse, stirred by their young blood and restless minds, and must rely instead on their first and often violent instincts, as Arthur does when the Green Knight laughs in his face:

> The blod schot for scham into his schyre face
> and lere;
> He wex as wroth as wynde,
> So did alle that ther were.
> The king as kene bi kynde
> Then stod that stif mon nere,
> And sayde, "Hathel, by heven, thy asking is nys,
> And as thou foly hatz frayst, fynde the behoves (317-324).

It is these spontaneous reactions of shame and rage that make Arthur go for the axe rather than the holly branch, and which ultimately result in Gawain striking the lethal blow. No clever trickery required on the Green Knight's part. It is also Gawain's animalistic survival instinct that ultimately compels him to accept the girdle and hide it from Bertilak, and thus to fail the test, as the fox evading the hunter's sword only to fall right into the hound's mouth.

By stripping the knights of their chivalric code in Fitt 1, the poem's supernatural elements reveal to us how dependent on it they really are. Once more, chivalry is presented here as a moral crutch, but an apparently necessary one. McAlindon notes that the poem's presence of magic and the supernatural in many ways echoes the role it plays in the larger tradition of medieval heroic narratives where it exists to test the hero's faith. The poem borrows from that structure of an "open attack on Christian virtue… by devilish magic" where "The magician aims to engage the saint in supernatural display or in debate, thereby hoping to humiliate him publicly, to demonstrate the impotence of his God, to trick him into apostasy or the abandonment of his (or her) chastity" (McAlindon 126), to show the hero the necessity of the "'passive' but… very exacting virtues of patient fortitude, truth, piety, and chastity" over the more typical 'active' virtues of "aggressive courage or military skill or natural cunning" (121).

For example, the bedroom scenes take on "the familiar narrative pattern where a man (usually a pagan) finds it impossible to win the body of a Christian woman and asks a magician to help him satisfy his desires" (126), where Gawain embodies the Christian woman cowering beneath his covers, powerless to the lusty man, here the Lady Bertilak's advances. And it is only his devotion to chastity and his courteous defusing of the Lady's advances, such as when he says

> "In god fayth," quod Gawayn, "gayn hit me thynkkez,
> Thagh I be not not now he that ye of speken;
> To reche to such reverence as ye reherce here
> I am wyghe unworthy, I wot wel myselven (1241-1244),

or:

> Bot to take the torvayle to myself to trwluf expound,
> And towche the temez of tyxt and talez of armez
> To yow that, I wot wel, weldez more slight
> Of that art, bi the half, or a hundredth of seche
> As I am, other even schal, in erde ther I leve,
> Hit were a folé felefolde, my fire, by my trawthe (1540-1545),

which prevent him from giving in to his animal lust and thus spare him from being beheaded in the Green Chapel. And though the Lady is ultimately able to compromise Gawain by resorting to the magical girdle, this failing Bertilak says is forgiven after Gawain "art confessed so clene, And hatz the penaunce apert of the point of myn egge" (2391-2392), and for the most part did keep his oath to him, absurd as it was to do so.

So, even though the "antagonists" in SGGK aren't strictly antagonistic, their schemes nevertheless result in a similar reaffirming of the necessity for Christian/chivalric virtues—not just to overcome these magical forces in the short term, but to overcome one's uncivilized nature in the long term too. Here, the chivalric code allows Gawain to keep his head both in a physical

and intellectual sense. Such codes are what structure human thought and without them we are merely slaves to our primal nature. It is precisely because Gawain relies on this rigid set of maxims to get himself out of trouble that he is able to transcend the more unrefined elements of his nature that got him into said trouble in the first place. And to not let ourselves merely be guided by the whims of our impulses is where true free agency really lies.

Now it has been argued here that the Green Knight's test can either be seen as being meant to reveal the hollowness of the chivalric code or instead how the knights are completely hopeless without it. It is quite clear throughout the poem that it can be both a help and a hindrance. In the banquet hall, it is Gawain's chivalrous intervention that lands him in the middle of this intrigue, and partly out of reverence to his king and uncle that he does not question the wisdom of a lethal blow when he says to him "'Kepe the, cosyn', quoth the kyng, 'that thou on kyrf sette, And if thou redez hym right, redly I trowe That thou schal byden the bur that he schal bede after" (372-374). However, by saying to Arthur that only the weakest and most expendable knight should bother with this "note [that] is so nys that noght hit yow falls" (358), this intervention soothes the injury to the court's pride and defuses the tension caused by the Green Knight's interruption by preventing Arthur and the other knights from further enraging and compromising themselves. Similarly, Gawain's devotion to chastity in the bedroom scenes at Hautdesert both places him in a position of uncomfortable inner turmoil while also preventing him from falling into the Lady's trap. But it is also due to his devotion to his knightly reputation and the ideals it embodies that he is so effectively rattled when the Lady calls it into question by telling him "Sir, yif ye be Wawen, wonder me thynkkez" (1481).

Both of these perspectives seem to agree that the chivalric code is a crutch of sorts that the knights lean on and that the test is about how the knights react when they either have or don't

have that crutch to lean on. Depending on how one sees this, the exchange of blows in Fitt 1 either shows how the knights thoughtlessly behave when they are encouraged to use this crutch or how they thrash wildly about when it is kicked out from under them. Is it an intellectually lazy moral shortcut or a necessary external support? The question of whether Gawain is able to think or act morally without it should not be determined by his behaviour in Fitt 1. As Sharma reminds us, Gawain's reaction was foreordained by le Fay, and so he was never given much of a chance to exercise his free agency even if he wanted to. It wouldn't be fair to expect him to in such a setting or context. How could he transcend his courtier persona from within the court's confines?

The true test of Gawain's morality and free agency is to see whether he is still able to be that perfect courtier and act morally once outside of the court, outside of his comfort zone and without any external pressure or encouragement to act according to the chivalric code, in situations where the stakes are real and the right or courteous thing to do isn't known to him in advance. The purpose being to show him that he does not need this code of conduct to tell him what is right or wrong. But knowing what is right must necessarily involve an awareness of what is wrong. To better understand this, let us consider Bertilak's first feigned swing of the axe in the Green Chapel upon which Gawain flinches. Bertilak makes him aware of this cowardly instinctive act and reminds him that he himself took his beheading without flinching or fleeing. It is only after being made aware of the discrepancy between his cowardly reaction and Bertilak's nobler one that he is then able to find enough courage to stand still during the second blow. His animalistic impulse was pointed out to him and he was therefore able to correct it through sheer will.

The Green Knight's interruption of the banquet in Fitt 1 plays a similar role in that it gives Gawain a taste of the very real consequences of slipping into "chivalric autopilot" and

indulging his animal impulses. Once he is made aware of this effect that the court and its code have on his behaviour, he is then better able to maintain a clear and rational view of the situation when he is tested next at Hautdesert. Indeed, after the second bedroom scene during dinner where, despite the Lady Bertilak filling him with "wroth with hymselven" (1660) with her furtive looks of "stollen countenaunce" (1659), evoking in front of everyone at the dinner table what happened behind closed doors in the bedroom, Gawain nevertheless "dalt with hir al in daynté, how-se-ever the dede turned towrast" (1662-1663) and always maintained his courteous composure while also suffering this great inner turmoil.

His mastery of courtesy allows him to once more defuse the tension (this time sexual) in the room, mirroring his first supremely courteous intervention back in Camelot when he stepped up to take the axe from Arthur's hand, thereby defusing the threat of the Green Knight and lowering the collective temperature in the room. But that he is still able to be so courteous here, despite all the trickery, lying, inner turmoil, and unfamiliarity around him, shows that that earlier intervention was not some empty, performative act of flattery dictated by the rules of aristocracy, but was rather born, as it is now at Hautdesert, out of a sincere and spontaneous moral impulse. By removing all external factors or crutches, there can be no doubt left of the authenticity of these acts of courtesy.

That is why we also know his confession in the Green Chapel to be true, even though for some it may be diminished by the anti-feminist tirade that immediately follows it. In that light, it may seem as if he gave it begrudgingly, like someone who knows he's been caught, like an animal caught in a trap. But it is precisely because of his tirade that we can know without a doubt that it neither wasn't a purely performative act, otherwise he'd have performed it a little better, no? It is such an uncourteous display that it couldn't possibly be for the benefit of anyone other

than Gawain himself (and, as Bertilak reminds him, they are completely alone there anyhow). It is born out of a private feeling of guilt and contrition and a sincere desire to "Letez me overtake [his] wylle" (2387), rather a peer-pressure-induced social shame.

Gawain emerges from the Green Chapel so crestfallen and mortified that he is unable to take Bertilak up on his offer to celebrate with him at Hautdesert. It is perhaps because he is so relentlessly unforgiving of himself that it could be hard for readers to disagree that he failed and that the test successfully revealed some sort of irrational weakness or dogmatic hypocrisy on his part, or to see the girdle he goes on to wear on his left arm as anything other than a "syngne of [his] surfet" (2433). But it is only a reminder of his first failure, of his original sin where "The faut and the fayntyse of the flesche crabbed" (2435) instinctively flinched in the face of adversity, so that he may never forget that he is able to stand on his own two feet and do the right thing and correct his own flaws, without any threat of punishment or promise of reward required, if given a full and fair chance to do so. And to be aware of the inherence of one's own fallible nature is to immediately be able to forgive it, and to live with it without feeling the need to contain or justify it. It prevents us from continually falling for the same tricks and setting ourselves up for someone else's impossible standards for failure.

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