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Agency and Invasiveness of the Natural World in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

Abstract: The article explores the duality of the natural world and civilisation in the 14th century *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, arguing that nature in the poem is portrayed as an invasive force, causing chaos in the heart of the civilised world and reversing the rightful direction of the knight venturing into the wilderness to conquer nature. The natural world works through several agents, the most important of which is the eponymous Green Knight, who embodies elements of both worlds, but the principal focus of this paper is, in particular, on the Green Chapel, with the aim of revealing some new aspects of its significance in the poem. It is also demonstrated how the blending of the two worlds is reflected in the themes of corruption, or moral invasion, death, and ritual.

Keywords: Arthurian cycle, ecocriticism, greenery, the Middle Ages, nature, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

With its nuanced descriptions and rich symbolism the mid-to-late fourteenth-century *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* remains an enduring inspiration for many scholars and writers. The romance entices the modern reader with its engaging plot, compelling metre, and, last but not least, the heady mixture of sex and violence. The tale features a young Gawain of the Arthurian lore trapped in the deadly beheading game and venturing to meet his doom in the mysterious Green Chapel. He encounters Castle Hautdesert on his journey, where he plays the exchange-of-winnings game with the host, Sir Bertilak. Gawain is tempted to cheat fate and breaks the rules to save his life, keeping the supposedly magical girdle, the gift from Lady Bertilak, instead of giving it back to the host. The ensuing confrontation with the Green Knight, revealed to have been Sir Bertilak all along, leaves Gawain regretting his decision to cheat – while he does not suffer any lasting bodily harm, he is confronted with his less-than-honorary conduct and forced to face both private guilt and public shaming.

Gawain's journey is quite perilous, at times, it seems the whole world is against the young knight. Long descriptions of the surrounding nature are laden with pathetic fallacy, though nature retains autonomy from the protagonist, going against him instead of complementing his emotional state. The aim of this paper is to employ ecocritical analysis[1] in order to explore the duality of the *human/civilisation/Inside* associated with structure, the transformed world, as well as court and Christianity, and the *non-human/natural world/Outside*, associated with chaos, as well as untransformed or reclaimed landscape. Permeability of the borders between those two realities and the potential for corruption by means of reversing the proper order of the *human* conquering the *non-human* are also explored as a consequence of this duality.

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[1] Ecocritical approach to reading *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is not a novel enterprise. Continuing the long tradition of earlier scholars who had looked at the natural world in the poem, Michael George in his article "Gawain's Struggle with Ecology: Attitudes toward the Natural World in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" provides an in-depth analysis of proto-ecocritical and ecocritical approaches to the text and an insight into the inescapable pervasiveness of nature in the poem. There is, however, still much to say regarding the complicated and entirely fluid border between the human-transformed world (civilisation) and the wilderness (nature) that seem to be at war in an endless cycle of invasion and conquest.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a romance structurally governed by its rhythm and the intricate symbolism of numbers. There is the five of the pentangle, explicated in a lengthy passage in association with Christianity. It has been suggested that the four fitts into which the poem is divided correspond to the four seasons, the changing seasons being a background for the transformative change which happens in Gawain through a mystical rite of passage (Mackley 337-338). There are three elements of the exchange-of-winnings game – the three hunts and the three kisses – as well as the three swings of the axe, which reflect a well-established structure of a fable.

Howard notes that among all the rules that govern this poem one is at the forefront, and that is the rule of symmetry: "No one who reads *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* fails to notice its elaborate, symmetrical structure. Everywhere in the poem is balance, contrast, and anti-thesis" (425). Binaries emerge time and again throughout the text: two meetings with Bertilak in his Green Knight persona, two Christmases and New Year's Days, two castles, two feasts at Camelot. There is also a duality of symbols present throughout the poem: three gifts exchanged for three swings; the "perfect" knot on Gawain's shield, providing divine protection, and the "imperfect" knot of the girdle, which ultimately proves ineffective in protecting the knight. Gawain also "cheats" twice when he decides not to hand over the girdle – by breaking the rules in the exchange-of-winnings game, and by attempting to escape the consequences of the beheading game. This dual mode of presentation is crucial for what is explored in this paper – the relationship between the two worlds Gawain unwittingly navigates: the knightly society of Camelot and Hautdesert on one hand, and on the other the dangerous, unpredictable, wild Outside surrounding the insular civilisation.

The dichotomy of civilisation and the natural world is clearly visible in *Sir Gawain*, where the image of the Christian civilised world replicates the creation of the world "in measure and number and weight" (Wisdom 11:21). In the Middle Ages, Christianity (and, by extension, what we now understand as Western civilisation) superimposed order onto the world that had been made imperfect with sin. Whatever belongs to the structured, hierarchical civilisation constitutes an enclave, the safe Inside that protects the body and soul alike from the dangers of the Outside – the imperfect natural world, the domain of chaos and sin. Gawain, who must venture into the wild, faces many dangers and risks his life to uphold order when the natural world invades his home. The world of social hierarchy, court, manners, and religion is intricate, artificial, but, what is perhaps most important, it is also structured. The chaotic, unpredictable wilderness of the Outside is a threat to Gawain on the physical, spiritual, and mental levels.

In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* the safety of the Inside is breached, with the Outside personified in the figure of the Green Knight, literally invading Camelot (George 37; Goldhurst 61). The invasion is in clear violation of roles – the wilderness is where knights would usually venture on quests to defeat and conquer the chaos without. Gawain's mission is thus to restore the rightful order to the world in a strange rite of passage, facing the dangers of the Outside armed and protected with both faith and very material armour designed and shaped by human hands to protect him in a compromise between the spiritual and the material (Howard 426-427). However, the victory he ultimately attains is imperfect, tainted by Gawain's giving in to temptation.

The Corrupted Castle

Gawain leaves Camelot knowing he would likely never come back. He dons his armour, a shell of carefully manufactured protection against both physical and spiritual harm of the Outside. His journey in search of the Green Chapel, where he would meet his fate, is long and arduous, with many dangers chipping away at his physical and mental health. The description of Gawain as he rides through the forest of Wirral seems contradictory, as he is described as riding "meryly" (740) despite the dreary landscape, which is consistently described as depressive. Soon, however, Gawain sighs and prays for a haven in a display of weariness. By means of religious ritual (through a prayer to Mary) his wish is granted: tired and longing for spiritual consolation, he is presented with a sudden, much welcomed sight of Castle Hautdesert on Christmas Day. In the *descriptio loci* of the castle are emphasised its sturdy walls and beautiful appearance, promising both safety from the dangers that have been plaguing Gawain on the Outside and the comforts of civilisation within. The castle is surrounded by a park which in turn is guarded from the true Outside by spiked fences. This marriage of human habitat and tamed nature within an enclosed space hints at the soon-to-be-revealed double nature of Gawain's host.

Outside, Gawain is faced with the hostility of nature: wild men, giants, dragons, and beasts inhabiting "þe wyldrenesse of Wyrale" (701), where wayward people are said to have given up on both God and good men (702); his worst enemy, however, turns out to be yet another weapon in nature's arsenal – the harsh wintry weather. When he arrives at Hautdesert, he is cold and sickened from exposure, with the host offering him a warm, courteous welcome worthy of a knight but barring him from going hunting on the pretext of Gawain's poor health (cf. 1093-1095).

For Gawain, Hautdesert is the necessary *ersatz* for Camelot, both insular strongholds of civilisation and the only places where he can thrive. However, he is unaware that Hautdesert had been corrupted by the same forces that earlier disturbed the order of Camelot. We see that in the form of the crone who accompanies the lady of the castle and who is treated with reverence by the courtiers; later in the poem she is revealed to be Morgan, the real antagonist and the mastermind behind the Green Knight's invasion of Camelot. Significantly, Morgan represents the supernatural connection to the Outside, the polar opposite to the order and virtue of king Arthur and Camelot. Her quiet, unannounced presence at Hautdesert is a sign that the castle is not free of danger, which at this point is not known to Gawain. In fact, Wood (216-217) notes that Gawain is given a brown, fur-lined coat that puts him in the skin of an animal and, in the context of the upcoming hunts, prey. The medieval animal fable of the Reynard cycle tradition, evoked in the poem through the name of the fox, used a device to portray animals with human characteristics, thus bringing them closer to the border between the human and the non-human; however, as this was more often than not a commentary on human behaviour, this also brought humans closer to the same precarious border (Van Dyke 36-38). Gawain's association with the animals Bertilak hunts is degrading and hints at the corruption which occurs at the castle.

The exchange-of-winnings game is a test to Gawain's virtues as a knight and a Christian, a test that he only marginally passes. Gawain's shield, painted with a symbolism-laden pentangle on the outer side, professing him as the "ideal knight" (Howard 426), and with a likeness of Virgin Mary on the inner side, is not only a reminder of the chivalric virtues Gawain should adhere to, but is also an indicator of where Gawain should have placed his hopes – his faith in God's protection and the favour of Mary; the acceptance of essentially ineffective "protection" of the girdle he receives from Bertilak's wife is not only a break in his conduct as a guest (both by breaking the rules of the game he is playing with the host and by accepting love tokens from his wife), but also in his Christian vows. By giving in to temptation and accepting of the girdle from the Lady of the castle Gawain undermines his belief that faith would protect him from harm. The girdle both stands as the symbol for the worldly luxuries Gawain should, as an ideal knight, shun, and hints at the unsavoury forces of the Outside through its green hue, a colour which "invades" the noble red in which Gawain is clad when setting on his journey. Moreover, he makes a conscious choice by refusing to give up the token to Bertilak, as per rules of the game, further cementing his transgression. The breach in his code of honour is irreversibly intertwined with faith, the strong undercurrent of Marian devotion running parallel to religious transgression, for which he will later publicly vow to make lifelong penance (2506-2510).

Lady Bertilak, acting as one of the agents of the Outside, has got a similar role to that of the Green Knight: she invades the heart of the civilised world within Gawain himself; when he leaves Hautdesert, he has already been morally compromised. Nevertheless, while Gawain compromises his integrity as a knight, he does not abandon his faith entirely and remains pious in other aspects; after the conclusion of the beheading game, his giving in to temptation would be deemed as justified by Bertilak. This blemish presents an interesting connection to Gawain's place in the general Arthurian lore as the "imperfect" knight who comes within arm's reach of the Grail, but is ultimately not worthy of becoming the Grail-bearer. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain is driven to give into his base instincts (fear) and consequently resorts to dishonesty. He is manipulated into introducing chaos into the superimposed order of the world by breaking the rules of the structured games.

The Sacred and the Green

The Green Chapel's description is carefully detailed and, notably, while the presence of shrubbery is mentioned in the poem, Gawain arrives at the promised place in the midst of winter. The place-name turns out to be a deception (Carston 598-599; Saunders 208) designed to mislead both Gawain and the reader/listener, as the place is neither a chapel nor implied to be very green at all. Despite the place being overgrown with "gresse" and "erbez", the earlier description of the changing seasons suggested the plants might have lost their vibrant colours, as "al grayes þe gres þat grene watz ere" (527), while the naked trees, and the snow lingering on the ground hint at the barrenness of the area.

However, despite its unequivocally natural state as presented in the poem, the Green Chapel is far from the wilderness of transition that Gawain braves either on his way to Hautdesert, or venturing to the Green Chapel. While it could be argued that the Green Chapel is a natural formation, compelling arguments have been made that the distinctiveness of the location – a smooth mound among the jagged terrain – points to a human-made structure, perhaps a pagan ritual site or a tumulus (Saunders 208). The Green Chapel would thus be seen as a place reclaimed by wilderness, one that was once part of a civilised world, but that is now overgrown with greenery.

Angela Carson notes that there are actually three chapels in the poem – one in Camelot, one in Hautdesert, and the final one being the Green Chapel itself (*The Green Chapel* 599). Religious life lies at the heart of the Inside, it is the ultimate source of order and structure in the civilised world, whether as part of the knightly ethos or through the reassuring guidance of the liturgical year that blends seamlessly with the passing of seasons. Thus, calling a desolate place a "chapel" in this context brings forth the association with the sacred spaces in Camelot and Hautdesert, but the place is at the same time their anti-thesis: for Gawain, the Green Chapel is a place of evil. Even in comparison to the forbidding terrain that did not allow him to dismount from his horse and rest, the site seems hostile and unwelcoming. The psychological effect that stepping into the Green Chapel has got on the knight might stem from Gawain projecting his fears upon the terrain (Rudd, *Greenery* 230), or perhaps, I would suggest, from identifying it as a significant but essentially foreign ritual space.

The *sacrum* of the Green Chapel is not one Gawain is familiar with or is willing to accept; his rejection of the place and abject fear signify how foreign the sacredness of the Green Chapel is to the deeply Christian Gawain. For him, the sacred is rooted firmly in the Christianity and the Green Chapel is very ostensibly not Chrisitian. Disturbed, Gawain identifies the site as something that might be a place of worship of infernal powers. The Chapel's *sacrum* constitutes a taboo space that is often associated with the Other – ring forts, fairy mounds, and, indeed, burial grounds; moreover, Gawain is strictly warned against entering the site by his guide.

Mackley notes that the Green Chapel itself does not constitute what we might call liminal space, but is a ritualistic place, a trying ground for Gawian's rite of passage; it is a consecrated space of death and rebirth (341-342). However, the Green Chapel also retains a certain duality of the natural and the preternatural, the human and the non-human element, life and death in balance. The name of the place explicitly reflects the imperfect balance of the natural world and the transformed landscape, making the Green Chapel a place in-beween both worlds, though already taken over by greenery, all but cleansed of its human element. This duality does not negate the sacredness of the space – indeed, the *sacrum* is reflected in the awe Gawain feels when confronted with the quiet, although disturbing, gravitas of the Chapel. Gawain's identification of the disquieting feeling with the Devil may just be his attempt to frame the uncanny in terms that he knows and understands.

Death of the Ages

In his perennial *Western Attitudes Toward Death, from the Middle Ages to the Present*, Ariès writes about "taming" Death, especially in *chansons de geste* and romances, with knights acquiring epiphanic knowledge of their impending deaths. The strong negative association Gawain has upon realising he has arrived at his destination might have been such a premonition of his own mortality, and, according to Carston, Gawain might have realised that he had been tricked regarding the nature of the "chapel," which in this context is not a church, but rather an abattoir (601–602). The fulfilment of Ariès's trope is only averted at the eleventh hour, though before that, while standing at the threshold of the Chapel, Gawain becomes very conscious of his (supposed) incoming doom.

An interesting comment is made by the servant/guide who leads Gawain towards the Green Chapel (but does not follow him there): the Green Knight reportedly slaughters everyone who enters the Chapel, regardless of their social standing. This egalitarian treatment of death in the Green Chapel is reminiscent of Death imagery in the *danse macabre* trope of post-pestilence Europe. The second half of the fourteenth century was the time when the consequences of the Black Death would be painfully apparent, with many households or even whole villages abandoned in the wake of the depopulation and economic crisis that followed the Plague. Knighton, the *Gawain*-Poet's contemporary, describes the decay of human habitats:

> After the aforesaid pestilence many buildings of all sizes in every city fell into total ruin for want of inhabitants. Likewise, many villages and hamlets were never inhabited again. In the following winter there was such a lack of workers in all areas of activity that it was thought that there had hardly ever been such a shortage before. (qtd in Platt 5)

The duality of the "dead" and "alive" elements in the portrayal of personified Death might hold the key to understanding the fear that the Green Chapel evokes in both the servant and Gawain. The High Middle Ages brought the image of Death portrayed not only as a skeleton, but also as *transi*, an animated, rotting human corpse, often becoming a host for various animals – snakes, toads, and worms – born of its wilting organs as posthumous manifestation of sin. This post-human vision of life after death was grotesque and was certainly revolting to the contemporaries, but it also provides an insight to how Gawain must have felt entering the Green Chapel. With signs of life even in the midst of winter[2], the place is in itself something akin to an animated corpse.

There is yet another duality implied in the text – that between the glories of Britain's mythical past and the abandoned Green Chapel. The poem's opening invocation of the glory of Troy and the noble origins of Britain recalls moments that fold neatly into the vision of the feast in Camelot. The two images confront the reader/listener with the British civilisational "golden age." Indeed, to the *Gawain*-Poet, both of these, the Trojan war and the Arthurian lore, featuring prominently in Geoffrey of Monmouth's enduringly popular *Historia Regum Britanniae,* were part of the national mythos, and both were equally distant from the *Gawain*-Poet in their sheer concept[3].

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[2] While the Chapel itself is not described as green, making its name doubly misleading, the illustration of the manuscript features a lush dark-green hill thickly overgrown with shrubbery. The scene pictured in the penultimate illustration attached to the poem shows the Green Knight calling to Gawain from up the mound, with the cave from which he will emerge in the lower right side. The illustration is inaccurate regarding the text – Gawain remains mounted on his horse and the Green Knight's complexion is not green; nevertheless, the flawed illustration presents evidence for how suggestive the notion of the Green Chapel being green actually was.

During his journey to Hautdesert, Gawain kept inquiring about the Chapel, yet no one knew the whereabouts of the place. The Chapel, when Gawain finally beholds it, must seem like a monument of oblivion and a reminder of the death of a civilisation, with its nature as something that might have been made by human hands being only hinted at. The location fills Gawain with dread; in theory, it should be a dwelling, though Gawain arrives there to find it deserted. However, even though it is located in the middle of wilderness, the Green Chapel is distinct from the surrounding greenery. Gawain recognises it even without his guide present and comments that "þis oritore is vgly with erbez ouergrowen" (2190) as if the shrubbery at the Chapel was a surprising and unwelcome notion. The Green Chapel has had its past erased – the reader/listener cannot be sure who (or what) had left the place to decay.

A juxtaposition of the mythical past at the beginning of the poem and the forgotten burial site at the Green Chapel uncovers the vanity of earthbound life – the heroes of old might be remembered in stories, but their graves would eventually be forgotten. Nature in the poem is seen as an aggressor and conqueror, invading human society and interfering with the safe space of the Inside, both in the form of the Green Knight interrupting the celebrations at Camelot and the desolation of the Green Chapel. The invading Outside is an aberration, a threat to the order of things and the reversal of the role of the knights who venture into the wilderness to conquer both natural and supernatural forces lurking in the outer world. The Green Knight venturing into Camelot on a horse is a force of nature, a clash of two worlds personified.

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[3] Geoffrey's text elaborates on the legendary history of the British Isles, with a sizeable part of it dedicated to the reign of King Arthur and the period directly preceding the Arthurian period. The motif of Troy was reiterated numerous times in the literature of medieval Britain, with most of the more prominent texts (e.g.: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, Lydgate's *Troy Book*) appearing around the time of the reign of Richard II, when the 1388 rebellion in London earned the city the moniker of "Little Troy" or "New Troy" (in *Erkenwald*); the surge of popularity of the Geoffrey of Monmouth's pseudo-historical source could thus perhaps be attributed to the political climate of the time (cf. Frederico 1-28).

Our modern perspective complicates the matter further – the knowledge of Britain's "real" history and the mythical picture painted by the poet create a dissonance, the mythological landscape present in the culture of the High Middle Ages being irreconcilable with the one we share today. Even though modern literature is not free of skewing, glorifying, and otherwise transforming history, the general model of history has changed considerably. There are thus several perspectives we must consider when discussing the poem: Gawain's perspective, the meta-persective of the Arthurian cycle, the historical and cultural perspective of the *Gawain*-Poet, and finally the perspective of the modern reader.

Agents of Discord

Michael George points out that among all the monsters and the beasts appearing in the poem, two of the animals that Sir Bertilak hunts – the boar and the fox – are presented as characters: they are personified, given motivations and psychological depth (39). All three animals hunted by Bertilak mirror the hunt for fur-clad Gawain at Hautdesert, with the does reflecting his timid response on the first day, the boar – his brave response on the second, and the fox – his attempts to outwit Lady Bertilak. Mackley interprets the hunt's ritualistic spilling of blood as a sacrifice, the animals dying in lieu of Gawain's death at his trying ground at the Green Chapel (Mackley 340).

The Green Knight comes to Camelot as a powerful supernatural force – his appearance, gigantic size, and, most importantly, green complexion and long green hair and beard are unnatural and designate him as the Other. In the Green Chapel he seems unnaturally fast, greeting Gawain from up the hill, then moments later emerging from the cave, as if he were a chthonic deity emerging from the netherworld, a pagan god or a fairy stepping through the gate from the Celtic Otherworld (Larrington 226-228). Yet the Green Knight is not someone who can be simply called a vestigial Celtic spirit. His dual identity as Sir Bertilak means he both embodies the natural world and is its anti-thesis at the same time (Goldhurst 63-64). Moreover, he seems to blend these two forces within himself during the scenes of the hunt – he acts as a steward in the forests surrounding his home, carefully selecting the animals to be hunted and engaging in conservation efforts when he orders the hunting party to hunt only the does (George 37-38).

The dichotomy of Sir Bertilak and the Green Knight reflects the human and non-human elements in the poem. The character constantly walks the line between the natural and the supernatural, life and death, order and chaos, Christianity and paganism (Saunders 207-209). Bertilak/Green Knight is someone who stands for both the natural and the civilised world, which, as in the case of the Green Chapel, is implied in his persona's name – the Green Knight retains the qualities of both the natural and civilised world. In the halls of Camelot, armourless, yet riding a horse decked in his colours and bearing a weapon, he seems to be an intruder and an aberration, yet he is also a champion of the invading, chaotic nature[4], issuing a knightly challenge in the heart of the civilised world according to this world's rules. His symbolic and short-lived death and subsequent rebirth mirror the ancient rites of the death of winter and the birth of summer, and are reminiscent of pagan chthonic deities. In the Green Chapel he yet again stands as a god, a master of Gawain's fate, one who can punish and forgive Gawain's transgressions, as well as guide the young knight through his rite of passage.

At the conclusion of the beheading game, Morgan is revealed to be the hidden antagonist of the poem, while Sir Bertilak and Lady Bertilak[5] – merely tools at her disposal. She is called both "morgne la faye" (2446) and "morgne þe goddes" (2452), alluding to her supernatural power of distinctly non-Christian origin, which is significant, as the invasion of Camelot, the stronghold of civilisation, takes place on one of the most important Christian holidays. The violation later turns out to be even more disconcerting, as the chief motive behind staging the beheading game during a feast was an assassination attempt at Guinevere, who is seated at the heart of the court. Camelot is sprayed with the Green Knight's green blood in a similar manner to how Gawain's blood will be spilled on the ritual site of the Green Chapel in a strange blood ritual, essentially an exchange of sacrifices in a long ritual that binds civilisation and wilderness together.

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[4] Seen rather as a chaotic and corruptive force of nature, than the goddess Natura, who was often portrayed as subservient to the Christian God and imposing the natural law (and thus civilisational structure) upon the world (cf. Curtius).

[5] Lady Bertilak has also been identified by scholars with Morgan le Faye as a singular corruptive force in the form of a dual character (cf. Carson, *Morgain la Fee* 6; Heng 502-506; Williams 49-52).

Finally, the Devil must be mentioned as an agent of chaos. Green was the Devil's colour and Gawain readily attributes the Green Chapel to infernal powers, accusing the Green Knight of either being in cahoots with the Fiend or being the Devil himself:

> wel bisemez þe wyȝe wruxled in grene
> dele here his deuocioun on þe deuelez wyse
> now I fele hit is þe fende in my fyue wyttez
> þat hatz stoken me þis steuen to strye me here (2191-2194)

Yet the association of the Green Knight with the Devil is undermined by the Green Knight's role as an arbiter and confessor in Gawain's trial (Andrew 317-318; Saunders 231). The Devil thus becomes strangely removed from the poem, yielding agency to the Green Knight, Lady Bertilak, Morgan, and the beasts and monsters inhabiting the wilderness. The role of the Devil in orchestrating or inspiring these events remains ambiguous, the poem itself leaving the question of the underlying source of discord, whether Christian or pagan, open to interpretation.

Conclusion

The natural world and the civilised, human space seem to be at war in the poem, the forces of nature invading the heart of the civilised world, Camelot, and assailing Gawain each time he ventures into the wilderness. Yet the Green Knight never comes unbidden (George 34; Rudd, *Greenery* 111) – in Camelot he comes answering Arthur's invitation of an 'adventure' (91-99) and appears only when Gawain invokes him at the Green Chapel; even the sudden appearance of Hautdesert is prompted by a prayer (Mackley 338).

Wilderness is a necessary realm for a knight – without the Outside and the Other inhabiting it, the knights of romances would be made but obsolete as *milites Christi*, protectors of the Christian world and, consequently, of the civilisation built around a singular faith. Myth and religion stand at the centre of the chivalric identity, which is also created by designating what remains beyond its definition. In this context, wilderness – un-Christian, uncivilised, and non-human – becomes a necessary space for a knight, a place where he can attain fame. As Rudd points out, the wilderness where Gawain survives upon departing from Camelot is not an unnamed land, but is "þe wyldrenesse of Wyrale" (701). The wilderness here is given a name and borders, and becomes the "familiar unfamiliar" (*'The Wilderness of Wirral'* 55).

However, the poem also stands as a warning, for even though the Green Knight (acting as an avatar for the forces of nature) does not manage to topple the rightful order with his overture, the *status quo* in which the knights are the invading, conquering force has been questioned. This might be the premonition of the fall of Camelot and of the end of this young "first age" of chivalry. The desolate Green Chapel, located at the foot of a burrow and at the symbolic entrance to the netherworld, is a visible reminder of the transience of human greatness in the world. At the Green Chapel, a young knight sees his own future from the perspective of the poet writing at the time when Gawain's own grave had been overgrown with weeds and forgotten. And he is afraid.

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