

Harmonie Snow  
ENGL 3490  
Short Essay

### A True Villain

During our discussion of the tale of “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight”, my colleague Liv Angelakis put forth the opinion that “...*learning that the Green Knight is Bertilak I was convinced that the shame directed at Gawain is misdirected. If we are holding truth and chivalry in the same hand, as the same thing that makes a knight ‘knightly,’ then Bertilak is the most untruthful and unchivalrous of all.*” (Angelakis). While I do agree that the Green Knight plays a part, I see him as more a tool or a force of nature, in a greater scheme, in which other players are guiding events. It is their actions that I would like to examine, and see if I can make the case that the true villain lies elsewhere in our story.

Allow me to put on my detective hat and lay out what we know from this story and other contemporary texts. First, we know that the Green Knight has been hired by a familiar face: Morgan the Fay: “*The mighty Morgan the Fay, who lives in my manor....she guided me in this disguise to your gay halls / So that I could see if you were all as superb and splendid / As the fame of the Round Table runs with renown. / She produced this paradox in order to puzzle and perplex you, / and to goad poor Guinevere halfway to her grave.*” (Wilhelm 473) This confession comes just after Gawain laments to the Green Knight that he is embarrassed to be made a fool by the Green Knight’s wife and her confidante. Gawain declares “*it’s no great wonder whenever a woman outwits / A man and leads him away to mourning or to madness.*” (Wilhelm 472) and compares himself to Adam, Solomon, Samson and David, in whose company he places himself. The Green Knight then invites him to come back to the castle and meet with his wife and the lady Morgan, to once again take advantage of his hospitality.

I thought this whole scene to be quite peaceful, by comparison to how we’ve seen the

Green Knight behave. When we first meet him, he shows himself to King Arthur's Court as a fearsome and otherworldly being. Now, after all that effort, he has Gawain true to rights. Gawain has not held up his end of the bargain they made, yet the Knight forgives him and invites him back to his home. It's because of this that I think something more complex is at play, and Gawain just happens to have stepped into those machinations unaware.

So if the Green Knight is not taking his due for failing his test, what is his actual motivation? I suspect that from how he speaks of the lady Morgan (also known as Morgana le Fay), that they are friends, and that he would be empathetic to her larger cause. In the introduction to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* from our textbook, it's mentioned that one reason for this scheme is that Guinevere had previously embarrassed Morgan the Fay by exposing to Arthur Morgan's affair with Guinevere's cousin Guiomar. This story is told in greater detail in "The Mantle", found in *"Specimens of German Romance: Selected and Translated from Various Authors"* by George Sloane. In this telling, he explains that Guinevere was motivated by a desire to turn her husband against his sister, so that Morgan could not speak out about Guinevere's own affair with Lancelot.

Guinevere's hypocrisy in this makes her into the real villain for me, as she does everything she can to maintain her affair, regardless of who she hurts around her. All throughout the story, we are told how noble Gawain is, and how much he values his integrity. Yet, his queen is allowing him to be placed in danger, to hide her own secrets. As part of Guinevere's scheme in "The Mantle", she also tricks the maid Genelas into helping her expose Morgana, then has her banished from court. She may not know at first that the Green Knight is there at Morgan's behest, but still she does not speak up when someone who is obviously fay lays a challenge before the court, and her husband's young nephew takes up that burden. She doesn't even come to him in secret to warn him or give him any items of protection.

It is also significant to me that, because it is Gawain that takes up the challenge, the mood seems to change in how he is treated by both the Green Knight and the other characters

who encompass Gawain's tests and trials. I am of the opinion that it was Lancelot whom Morgan wanted to snare, hoping that Lancelot's status as a well-known knight and his sense of honor would cause him to step forward if the reputation of the Round Table were goaded enough. This suspicion is further supported by how the Green Knight checks Gawain's identity and repeats the details of the challenge, to be sure Gawain knows what the young knight will be facing. The Green Knight, while fearsome, is almost giving him an out. In addition to this, when Gawain is staying at the Green Knight's castle, he is befriended by the Queen and her confidante. They spend many hours together, and in that time neither of them attempt to poison, trap, or otherwise hurt him.

The terms of the game seem to have softened, once Gawain became the knight who stepped forward. Add to that, that the Green Knight invites Gawain back to the castle after revealing everything, to celebrate and spend time with people he does his best to portray as simply family and harmless friends, who have only wanted to have to play a harmless trick. Instead of punishing him, they want to make friends with Gawain, maybe to get him on their side in the larger conflict. Since he values honor and integrity so highly, maybe telling him of Guinevere's affair and sending him back to the court could be another way to strike at her, a way to still accomplish their goal through this scheme.

You could say that this argues more directly for Morgan to be the true villain, but I see her as mostly acting out of defense and hurt. Her actions against Guinevere and those around her come in the form of tests, so that those who have committed no wrongs should not suffer as a result. Guinevere seems more cold and calculated in her actions, and holds some enmity towards Morgan that initially comes out in verbal sparring at court: "*The princess (Morgan) was never at a loss for biting sallies; once, when King Arthur held his courpleniére at Christmas, she seized the cup...and drank to Arthur the health of all his brothers, warning him at the same time to drink moderately, that a drop might remain for each of them. Queen Guenevra...saw perfectly well that her allusion was to all those who had made free with the royal honour... She swore,*

*however, in her heart the direst revenge against Morgana, and watched her opportunity so well, that, before the moon had filled her bow with new light, the detested sister-in-law had fallen into her snares.”* (Soane 102).

In light of the larger conflict between these two ladies, it seems that the Green Knight is merely a way of testing one's merit and morals, instead of a conscious and active enemy. Gawain faces him and learns a lesson about how strongly he can hold to his personal ethics under threat, which in a way could be said to be simply what happens when one grows up. Gawain undertakes a challenge, leaves home, and returns a more sober and aware individual, with a more well-rounded sense of his limits and abilities. The Green Knight is more representative of that stage in life, and the normal and natural difficulties everyone must face if they are to grow as a person. By contrast, Guinevere simply attacks whom she pleases and seeks to hide her own violations of ethics by judging those around her. If we are indeed judging all characters by truth and chivalry, Guinevere seems to be sorely lacking in both categories. So to me, I feel that in this case, her actions bring the most harm to all involved. Thus, she is the true villain of “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight”.

## Works Cited

- 1: Lacy, Norris J., and James J. Wilhelm. *The Romance of Arthur: An Anthology of Medieval Texts in Translation*. Routledge, 2013.
- 2: Soane, George, et al. *Specimens of German Romance: Selected and Translated from Various Authors*. Printed for Geo. B. Whittaker, 1826.