

Jessica Vega

April 14, 2012

Mid. Lit. 3210

A Woman's Touch: an anti-misogynistic reading of "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"

One of the main sources of criticism of "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" is the representation of women. An initial reading of the text seems to depict women as sly, deceitful creatures. Upon closer review however, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" is not as misogynistic as it first appears. Throughout the poem there can be no doubt concerning the vital role that women play. Within the text, female characters take an almost ambiguous stance, their intent and true personalities are just as mysterious as the Green Knight's before his origins are explained. Yet, this ambiguity regarding their character can be interpreted in a positive manner. In the course of Gawain's journey to uphold his part in the beheading game, while he was in residence at Bertilak's castle, the Virgin Mary provides protection and a source of comfort to Gawain. Thus, the Virgin Mary takes on the form of maternal protection for Gawain, guarding him when he calls upon her. Lady Bertilak's role, however, is not as simple as Mary's. Her character straddles the line between temptress and helper. In spite of the deliberate grayness of her persona, it is only through Lady Bertilak that Gawain's morality and honor can be adequately tested. By failing her test on the third day and taking the girdle, Gawain is able to understand his shortcomings and strive to improve himself. The use of female characters and their desires is vital to the tale of "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight." Both Morgan's and Lady Bertilak's actions drive the narrative as demonstrated in part four of the poem. Thus, it is through women that the narrative gains momentum and finally ends with Gawain's realization of his knightly

flaws. Though it has often been read and misconstrued as a misogynistic text, the positive influence of the female characters are vital to the poem.

The Virgin Mary plays a major role in “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” despite never being a fully actualized character. Due to religious significance, Mary becomes a sort of latent character that is never really seen but whose presence can still be felt throughout the story. Her influence within the text goes beyond that of being an actual character; instead, it has an almost supernatural aspect. When the Virgin Mary does “physically” appear in the text, her appearance is meant to bring comfort and protection for Gawain. These physical representations take the form of the picture behind Gawain’s shield and the pentangle itself. While the pentangle has many different meanings, one of the most notable is the “five joys of Mary.” (Heng 504.) The fact that her “joys” are intertwined with the five knightly virtues helps to illustrate how Mary is interlocked with the knightly ideals that Gawain must uphold. Her image on Gawain’s shield is obviously meant to invoke divine protection against evil and harm, while the pentangle reminds Gawain of his duties within his knightly code. Her depiction on Gawain’s armor is not unusual, as the Virgin Mary has a vital role in the Christian knight’s code of values and conduct. (Cox 380.) Though these applications are obviously not the true character of the Virgin Mary, the fact that Gawain uses them for his protection and wellbeing is a profound concept. Through the use of these objects, Gawain is voluntarily invoking her spiritual power.

In addition to upholding Gawain’s standard of conduct and protecting his person through the use of his shield, Mary also provides spiritual assistance throughout the course of the narrative. The most well known example of the Virgin Mary’s divine influence is when Gawain is lost on Christmas Day. “...I beseech of Thee, Lord/ And Mary, Thou mildest mother so dear,/ Some harborage where haply I hear mass/ And Thy matins tomorrow- meekly I ask it/ no

sooner had Sir Gawain signed himself thrice/ Than he was ware, in the wood, of a wondrous dwelling.” (Borroff 33.) Through the guidance of the Virgin Mary and other divine figures, Gawain is able to find a refuge that grants him safety from the elements. As noted by Catherine Cox, when the Lady first comes to visit Gawain “...the Virgin Mary ultimately rescues her knight from the Lady’s sexual temptation.” Therefore, when Gawain does call upon her for protection and guidance, the Virgin answers his prayers. All of these examples of the Virgin Mary’s influence within the narrative demonstrate an undeniably positive version of female energy. The Virgin helps to protect Gawain’s mortal self through the use of the symbolic image on his shield and also through the use of divine intervention. She also grants Gawain moral encouragement by helping him to resist fornicating with the Lady and also by the symbolism that is found in the pentangle. Despite the fact that she is a Saint and considered the mother of God, Mary is also a woman. It is impossible to separate the two, as being a mother figure and a woman is central to her identity. Due to the interlocked nature of her goodness and femininity, Mary is able to help demonstrate a positive reading of women in “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.”

Unlike the Virgin Mary, Lady Bertilak is a more ambiguous character. When first introduced, Lady Bertilak seems to be nothing more than a beautiful, sly temptress who cares for nothing but seducing Gawain. She is the main reason involving a misogynistic reading of “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” as she is the indirect source of Gawain’s outburst. “That have trapped their true knight in their trammels so quaint./ But if a dullard should dote, deem it no wonder,/ And through the wiles of a woman be wooed into sorrow,/ For so was Adam by one, when the world began,/ And Solomon by many more.....Could one but learn to love, and believe them not.” (Borroff 72.) As noted by Harvey De Roo, this anger seems misplaced as the master

puppeteer for the moment is not the Lady but rather her husband. Despite this detail, Gawain directs the majority of his ire away from the Green Knight and towards womankind. It is important to note that Gawain's outburst is made once he realizes that the Lady Bertilak is the one who gave the Green Knight the information concerning the bedroom. De Roo brings up an excellent assessment of what Gawain could have been feeling when he uncovered the truth.

“Adding fuel to his antifeminism is Sir Gawain's accurate perception that the lady was lying to him. While he had been playing a game behind which lay no intention to have sex with her, it now appears that she was playing a similar game, and had no such intentions either. What then of the flattery of her praise, of her having apparently fallen in love with him? All untrue! What a blow to his male ego.”

As demonstrated over the course of the tale, Gawain is just as susceptible to mortal flaws as the next individual. It is extremely probable that due to Lady Bertilak's role in the Green Knight's test that Gawain harbors some resentment towards her; especially considering the lengths he went to keep their interactions a secret. He took her seriously, only to find out that he was tricked from the start.

Upon further reading of the poem the impression of Lady Bertilak as a wicked temptress does not hold up. No one else was in the room besides Lady Bertilak and Gawain. It is obvious that Gawain did not tell Lord Bertilak about receiving kisses from his wife. Yet, how did the Green Knight know what was going on between his wife and guest? From this information, one can accurately guess that Lady Bertilak herself told her husband about her treatment of Gawain. Why would she do this if all she wanted to do was sleep with Gawain? If Lady Bertilak was simply acting upon her sensual nature, then there would be no reason to tell her husband of the

events between Gawain and herself. Perhaps she was the unwitting pawn in Lord Bertilak's "scheme," and he knew beforehand how she would react towards Gawain. (Borroff 70.) Even if all this was so, the details of the kisses and the girdle would be mere supposition on Lord Bertilak's part until he met with Gawain at the Green Chapel and saw the girdle for himself. It is more likely that Lord Bertilak enlisted his wife's knowing aid to test Gawain's moral and knightly character. If the latter is the true method of how Gawain is tested, then Lady Bertilak is acting upon her husband's orders knowingly. It is for this reason that Lady Bertilak becomes a positive female figure. Her proficient acting ability and charm is what constitutes her power in the story as opposed to the Virgin's miracles and moral support. Thus, though she acts as an "agent of the male figure," Lady Bertilak is still able to demonstrate and assert her own power into the situation. (De Roo 244.) Since, she utilizes her talents to assist her husband in testing Gawain, Lady Bertilak still remains a faithful wife and positive image of femininity.

Lady Bertilak's attempts at seduction, when looked at in conjunction with Morgan's overreaching plot, demonstrate how female desire drives the narrative. Morgan's control of essentially the whole plot is at first meant to frighten Guinevere. However, the Green Knight also mentions how he was also meant to test the pride of Arthur's court. "She guided me in this guise to your glorious hall./ To assay, if such it were, the surfeit of pride./ That is rumored of the retinue of the Round Table./ She put this shape upon me to puzzle your wits,/ To afflict the fair queen, and frighten her to death." (Borroff 73.) Though scaring her sister-in-law was one of her motivations of creating the Green Knight, perhaps the main reason was to remind her brother and his court about their chivalric duties. There is too little evidence to correctly state either theory. Morgan receives too little interaction with the other characters and her personality is naturally ambiguous. We only receive the Green Knight's version of the events that happened. However,

there can be no doubt that without Morgan the plot would have never existed in the first place; and thus, Gawain and the other knights would never know how flawed their actions were. It is through Morgan that the Green Knight is able to receive his powers and make his way to Arthur's court, which in turn forces Gawain to begin his journey to uphold his end of the beheading game. Lady Bertilak provides a similar sort of drive through the narrative. As demonstrated in the previous paragraph, without Lady Bertilak, Gawain would have never been morally tested. Gawain would have just arrived at the castle, waited three days to go to the Green Chapel, and that would be all. He would not have learned about his shortcomings and the narrative would lack energy. The three days of returning gifts between Lord Bertilak and Gawain provide a source of suspension and curiosity. Will the Lord find out? Why is the Lady doing this? Will Gawain yield to her attempts at seduction? What will happen? All of these questions would be nonexistent without Lady Bertilak there to raise them. Furthermore, she is needed to demonstrate to Gawain that his love for life is in conflict with his codes as a knight. The girdle that she grants him is evidence of this fact, and it is this girdle that Gawain continues to wear as a reminder of his moral limitations. When back at Arthur's court, Gawain brings this lesson with him, therefore helping the rest of the court see the error in their ways. "The king comforts the knight, and the court all together/agree with gay laughter and gracious intent/ That the lords and the ladies belonging to the Table,/Each brother of that band, a baldric should have,/ A belt borne oblique, of bright green,/ To be worn with one accord for that worthy's sake." (Borroff 74.) Due to their positive nature, Morgan's and Lady Bertilak's actions help the story move forward, and they teach Gawain important lessons, which help to portray women in a favorable light.

The female characters in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are meant to be positive. The Virgin Mary helps to guide Gawain through his journey and provides spiritual protection. Also

her symbolic images that are presented in Gawain's possession demonstrate how Gawain looks towards her for guidance and assistance. Despite the fact that the Virgin Mary is not a fully actualized character, her personality and influence remain a prevalent part of the narrative and should not be ignored. Also, to deny her femininity on account of her divine status is restricting as being a mother figure is central to her character. Lady Bertilak's position, though more ambiguous than the Virgin, still provides vital aid for Gawain. No matter the method in which she becomes part of the "scheme," Lady Bertilak is central to Gawain's knightly test. By morally testing him through means of seduction, Lady Bertilak is able to highlight Gawain's flaws; thus, helping him to realize his shortcomings and allowing him make the necessary adjustments to them. In addition to Lady Bertilak's attempts at seduction, Morgan's overreaching influence is also utilized in a positive manner. Without Lady Bertilak or Morgan, Gawain's own moral improvement would have been nonexistent, as would the changes in Arthur's court. Gawain would have never have learned how his mortal flaws interfered with his knightly duties, and the court would never have noticed their overabundance in pride. Through both women the text is able to move forward, and their influences add flavor to the plot. Thus, all three women help Gawain in different ways. While the Virgin acts as a protector and guide, Lady Bertilak and Morgan act as teachers. By viewing "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" as a misogynic reading, one confines and ignores all the positive energy that is deployed by the female characters within the poem.

Works Cited

- Borroff, Marie. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: Patience ; and Pearl : Verse Translations*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2000. Print.
- Cox, Catherine S. "Genesis and Gender in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"" *Chaucer Review* 35.4 (2001): 378-90. *JSTOR*. Web. 3 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25096141>>.
- De Roo, Harvey. "What's in a Name? Power Dynamics in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"" *Chaucer Review* Vol. 31, No. 3 (1997): 232-55. *JSTOR*. Web. 4 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25095977>>.
- De Roo, Harvey. "Undressing Lady Bertilak: Guilt and Denial in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"" *Chaucer Review* Vol. 27, No. 3 (1993): 305-24. *JSTOR*. Web. 3 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25095808>>.
- Heng, Geraldine. "Feminine Knots and the Other Sir Gawain and the Green Knight." *PMLA* Vol. 106, No. 3 (1991): 500-14. *JSTOR*. Web. 4 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/462782>>.