The Blurred Boundaries Between Nature and Civilization in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Ashley Petrucci
Haverford College
Department of English
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The second section of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* begins with an image of men singing within the forest, which is sparked by their joy at the changing of seasons, from winter to summer. This natural setting thus invokes a powerful emotional experience due to its beauty and pleasantness at this point in the text. On a historical level, medieval views surrounding the forest also maintained a sense of positivity. According to Classen, this space was often regarded favorably for practical reasons, since “the forest has almost always been a crucial economic resource, supplying building material, fuel, and food” (Classen 2). On the other hand, the forest contains many negative features as well. For example, traversing the forest could be tumultuous, as it contains many frightening beasts and was often viewed as a space of lawlessness (Classen 4). The forest in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* serves the role of acting as a space of uncertainty and even perceived danger following this initial illustration of the outdoor setting. The natural landscape of the forest can be viewed as this area of mystery because it exists outside the sphere of human civilization: it is unlike other outdoor spaces such as farmland, since one

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1 *SGGK*, lines 510-515. Glossing by Battles, pages 53-54, used for translation.
can control a farm by deciding which plants are grown and what livestock is raised. The wilderness, however, is untamable. In spite of this, the characters never fully find themselves separate from nature, as human values and natural imagery blend together both within themselves and through their engagement in the hunt. This, in turn, reflects both the dependence upon and ambivalence toward the forest in medieval society.

There are three major sections in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* where the forces of nature and human society interact. The most explicit of these interactions can be seen through the process of hunting. The scenes with Sir Bertilak and his men display the relationship between the human hunter and the creatures of the forest while also showing a breakdown in the expected order of society as the prey becomes increasingly difficult to capture. The other two sections involve a more implicit relationship between nature and humanity. The first of these occurs when the Green Knight enters into King Arthur’s court, as he initially appears as a being completely associated with nature. He does, however, possess qualities that contain aspects of the civilized. In the opposite manner, Gawain, when traveling the forest to find the Green Chapel, acts as a representative of human society, as a chivalrous knight. His interactions in the forest later reveal that he does not completely represent civilization, as he unwittingly embraces nature through his interactions in the forest and his acceptance of the green girdle. Both of these sections, too, retain an aspect of the hunt, as the Green Knight and Sir Gawain act in ways indicative of them hunting each other. In each of these cases, the characters prove that the boundaries between nature and civilization are actually quite blurred.

For this thesis, I will be taking a predominantly ecocritical perspective, especially in conversation with “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism.” This 1976 essay by
Rueckert is one of the first on ecocriticism. Here, Rueckert connects literature and ecology in several interesting and productive ways. Rueckert discusses poems particularly as a form of renewable energy and also thinks about how certain pieces of literature can assist the reader in understanding and even influencing the health of the biosphere. Though intriguing to consider, these are not the aspects of the essay that I plan on using in my discussion of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Rather, I am more interested in the relationship between humans and ecology as well as what perceptions surrounding the forest show us about humans and society as a whole in the Middle Ages, both of which are discussed by Rueckert here, though without the focus on the medieval aspect. One particularly relevant quote is the following: “[i]n ecology, man’s tragic flaw is his anthropocentric (as opposed to biocentric) vision, and his compulsion to conquer, humanize, domesticate, violate, and exploit every natural thing” (Rueckert 113). In this thesis, I will consider what this “anthropocentric vision” tells the reader about the characters, particularly the ones considered to be predominantly civilized like Sir Gawain. For example, my discussion on hunting in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is indicative of the “conquering” and “exploitation” of nature by humans. This lens will thus assist me in discussing the interactions between human society and nature, which eventually leads to a blending of the two.

The hunting scenes act as exemplary of this blurring of human society and nature imagery. During his three separate hunts, Sir Bertilak and his men pursue different creatures for each: the deer, the boar, and the fox respectively. These hunts echo themes discussed in Edward, the Second Duke of York’s *The Master of Game*, a work that Dodman states “functions

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2 Each of these hunts parallel the bedroom scenes, where Lady Bertilak’s flirtations with Sir Gawain present her as a hunter attempting to attract her prey. This hunt is not the romantic gesture that it seems to be on the surface; rather, it is a test of Gawain’s chivalry. Lady Bertilak’s actions here thus depict a metaphorical hunt within society; however, her hunt will not be the focus of this paper.
as an extended defense of hunting's essential and natural role in maintaining order and developing the kind of men who will listen to orders” (Dodman 422). Indeed, the interactions amongst humans, as well as between humans and the forest, reveal a sense of semi-permeable boundaries between civilization and nature. Through the act of hunting, this division becomes blurred, as the group of hunters impose their civilized rules upon the wild setting due to the necessity of specific roles and routines for each of the hunters that preserve “the hierarchical world” (Dodman 420). With regards to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in particular, Sir Bertilak clearly retains his role as the ruler of the castle within the hunt, where he acts as leader. This leadership can be seen during his hunt of the boar, where he drives the attack and, in doing so, receives the glory associated with killing such a dangerous beast. On the other hand, more menial tasks, such as the breaking of the deer, are “handled […] by the woodsmen as opposed to the nobles such as Bertilak,” which, in turn, “emphasize […] traditional routines and orders” and position “marginalized masculinity on full and sudden display” (Dodman 420). The hunt, in this way, preserves societal structures, as one’s role in society influences how they function within the group of hunters. Such use of familiar hierarchical structures then allows for the civilized humans to superimpose their ways of living onto the wild setting of the forest. Additionally, by placing individuals into roles fitting to their social status, the leaders can enforce their orders upon those whom their laws govern in life outside the forest, thus not confounding individuals as to what their place is when they exit the wild setting. In this way, the hunt is extremely controlled as it relates to class, which minimizes danger both inside and outside the wilderness.

Though all the hunts in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* possess a certain structure, the hunt for the deer exemplifies the civilized nature of the hunt and the required organization most
distinctly. Even the treatment of this particular animal itself shows civilization’s attempt to rule over nature as it relates to hunting. For example, the goal of this hunt is to only target the female deer, as seen through Bertilak’s demands: “the fre lorde hade defende in fermysoun tyme / That ther schulde no mon meve to the male dere” (SGGK 1156-1157). In other words, because the male deer were not in season at the time of the hunt, they would be spared for the time being. Bertilak’s demands, and his men’s coercion to heed them, further displays his leadership position that is indicative of the hierarchy of civilization encroaching upon the wild setting of the forest. Through controlling his men, Bertilak maintains power over the fate of the differently gendered deer, and, by extension, over nature through his imposing of laws.

The scene preceding the hunt for these specific deer reveals the regimented nature required of the group. The hunters presented here are clearly quite aware of their arrangement from the very beginning, as their first actions following waking are described as such: “thay busken up bilyve blonkkes to saddel, / Tyffen her takles, trussen her males, / Richen hem the rychest, to ryde alle arayde” [they hurry at once their horses to saddle, / Prepare their things, tie up their bags, / Prepared most nobly, to ride all organized]. Indeed, the simultaneous action of these hunters, where they saddle their horses, displays their preparation for the hunt in a way that emphasizes its routine nature. In addition, the hunters all possess an awareness of their position in relation to the others, as they consider where they are to be “arayde.”

Following their routines within the castle, the men continue to prepare by releasing the hounds and sounding their horns before entering the forest:

Thenne thise cacheres that couthe cowpled hor houndes,  
Unclosed the kenel dore and calde hem ther-out,  

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3 SGGK, lines 1128-1130. Glossing by Battles, page 82, used for translation.
Blew bygly in bugles thre bare mote;
[...]
A hundreth of hunteres, as I haf herde telle,
of the best.
To trystors vewters yod⁴

[Then these hunters that knew how leashed their hounds,
Unclosed the kennel door and called them there-out,
Blew vigorously with horns three long notes;
[...]
Countless hunters, as I have heard tell,
of the best.
To stations dog keepers went]

This passage displays the use of the horn—a man-made object—during the hunt. The hunters rely upon this object constructed in the human realm for the purpose of urging the dogs into the forest and alerting others. In this way, man-made creations are necessary for capturing and conquering the beasts of the forest, as, without such inventions of civilized society, both the safety and organization of the hunters would be at risk. This description of the hunters’ routine reveals more about the regimented nature of the hunt as well, which can first be seen when one of the hunters blows the horn three times. The specification of the actual number exhibits its importance, possibly relating it to the trinity.⁵ Regardless of why the horn is blown three times, the fact that it is indicates that there exists a structure regulating the signals associated with each blow. Additionally, the regimented aspect is also shown through the last line, “[t]o trystors vewters yod.” This refers to the act of the dog keepers in arranging themselves into their own station (Battles 82). Again, this knowledge of exact positioning, especially through the reference to a specific group, highlights the importance of establishing order during a hunt. In addition,

⁴ SGGK, lines 1139-1141, 1144-1146. Glossing by Battles, page 82, used for translation.

⁵ This is quite likely due to the numerous Christian references within the rest of the text. The most prominent of these would be the lengthy description of the pentangle on Sir Gawain’s shield, where the images of Christ and his mother Mary are invoked (SGGK 619-665).
the particular reference to the “vewters” reveals a mirroring of vocational occupations, which are a vital part of human society that indicate one’s contribution via their own specialties. Each named position in the hunt thus acts in a similar way as a job, and, if everybody plays their part, it leads to a functioning of the whole.

The regimented structure of these hunters serves them well during the actual hunt for the deer. Indeed, this hunt possesses a rather systematic quality, as seen through the following lines:

At the fyrst quethe of the quest quaked the wylde;
Der drof in the dale, doted for drede,
Hiyed to the hyghe, bot heterly thay were
Restayed with the stablye, that stoutly ascryed.  

[At the first sound of the cry of the hounds quaked the game;
Deer rushed in the dale, crazed for dread,
Hurried to the high ground, but fiercely they were
Turned back by the huntsmen, that stoutly shouted.]

These actions begin the surrounding of the deer, as the barking of the dogs force the deer toward another group of hunters whose shouting then coerces them back into the direction of the dogs. Once the group contains these animals, the hunters can easily shoot them with bow and arrow while the dogs pick off the stragglers. Without this planned structure that allows them to surround their prey, a hunt comprising of such a large number of men would be quite chaotic and, in turn, would be far less successful. Instead, these men arrange themselves in a strategic fashion, much like men in battle do to trap their enemies. In doing so, the organization and lawfulness of civilization prevails over these wild creatures.

After the hunt, the men begin the breaking of the deer, which possesses connotations beyond merely carving the animal for consumption. In the article “The Game of the Courtly

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6 SGK, lines 1150-1153. Glossing by Battles, page 83, used for translation.
Hunt,” Judkins states, “the breaking synthesized these ties [amongst men of different hierarchical stations] in a single metaphorical act that portrayed the hunt as a microcosm of a feudal society” (Judkins 81). This further attests to the civilized nature of the hunt, as men of different stations come together for the entirety of the hunt and, again, maintain roles within the hunt that are analogous to those they possess in society. Judkins also emphasizes the fact that “the breaking takes up some forty lines” (Judkins 81). The length is due to the almost instructional nature of the description regarding the breaking of the deer, which furthers the idea of the regimented aspect of the deer hunt from the hunt’s beginning to its end.

The following hunt for the boar retains some of these regimented qualities from the deer hunt, yet one can sense order beginning to break down in a way that was not present in the previous hunt. Part of the reason for this is due to the danger presented by the boar. The Master of Game, in the chapter entitled “Of the Wild Boar and of His Nature,” illustrates the massively threatening disposition of these creatures: “there is neither lion nor leopard that slayeth a man at one stroke as a boar doth” (Edward, Second Duke of York 46). Most consider both lions and leopards to be quite menacing, so, in stating that a boar can wound a man in an even more severe way than these beasts, Edward emphasizes the danger associated with the boar. The boar’s threatening nature becomes even more profound due to proximity, since the boar is the only one of these three dangerous beasts that exists naturally within the realm of England.

Not only is this creature a potent killer according to Edward, but it is also “wild,” as they state in the title. Indeed, they only use the term “wild” to describe two out of ten animals in the chapters following the pattern of “Of the [Animal] and of [Its] Nature” (Edward, Second Duke of York v-vi). The other, which refers to the wild cat, situates the term “wild” in parentheses,
presumably to separate it from the house cat. The boar thus becomes the only creature that is mentioned in terms of its wildness in the chapter titles, making that appear to be one of its defining traits. The depiction of the boar in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* too confirms these wild and dangerous aspects affiliated with the boar. In this work, the boar possesses “frothe” that “femed at his mouth unfayre bi the wykes,” which “[w]hettes his whyte tusches” (*SGGK* 1572-1573). Such an image of a creature frothing at the mouth presents it as extremely ferocious, which supports Edward’s description. In this way, the boar acts as a representation of the danger and wildness of the forest in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which, in turn, the men attempt to conquer though their hunt.

In spite of the danger presented by the boar, the beginning of this hunt parallels that of the deer hunt. Both the archers and the dog keepers are once again accounted for, and they work together to drive the boar into a space within the bank where it could not escape. It is at this point that the hunt diverges from the previous, as, instead of moving closer and assailing the lone creature with arrows, the men hesitated and “neghe hym non durst for wothe” (*SGGK* 1575-1576). The refusal to move closer is then explained as being due to their fear of the boar, who “hade hurt so mony byforne” (*SGGK* 1577). Their fear of the danger presented by the boar, and, in turn, the wild aspects of the forest, causes these men to decline to adhere to their duty. It is thus through the dangerous aspects of the forest that these men do not completely follow their orders, and such a rejection of their assignment marks a slight breakdown in the civilized aspects of the hunt.

Following the hesitation of his men, Sir Bertilak decides to engage with the boar by himself:
Through these lines, one can see that the struggle between Sir Bertilak and the boar possesses little sense of order. Indeed, Bertilak dismounts from his horse to fight on foot, and, in doing so, he brings himself to the level of the boar. This makes for a rather haphazard affair, as both Bertilak and the boar fall “upon hepes” before Bertilak is able to slaughter it. It is thus only through the ability of Bertilak to engage with the boar in a similarly wild and uncivilized manner that he is able to conquer it, and, even so, his success in this matter is still achieved with a great amount of difficulty.

Rooney’s piece, “The Hunts in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” further elaborates upon the symbolism behind the boar hunt, particularly as it relates to Sir Bertilak, in the following manner:

This [the boar] was a formidable adversary, and the advice of the hunting manuals was that it should not be tackled on foot with a sword, as Bertilak does, but from horseback or with a boar-spear. In departing from actual practice, the Gawain-poet is following an established tradition of heroic depiction; great heroes […] traditionally kill a ferocious boar with a sword, thus amplifying the bravery and heroism of their deed. (Rooney 159)

This passage supports my prior assertion that Sir Bertilak’s fight with the boar is quite strange from a typical hunting perspective, which, again, pushes back against the civilized aspects of the hunt. In addition, it seems to place the actions of Sir Bertilak within this hunt in conversation

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7 SGK, lines 1589-1592. Glossing by Battles, page 102, used for translation.
with the heroic quest. In such tales, men fight dangerous creatures like this boar in single combat, which adds to the valor of their deeds. Because this situation occurs within a forest against one of the most menacing creatures of said forest, it displays Bertilak’s ability to conquer the dangers of the forest and also, in doing so, exist within it.

The final hunt—the hunt for the fox—also presents great difficulty for the hunters. Unlike the boar, which was established as a dangerous creature, the fox possesses other attributes, such as cleverness and sneakiness. Edward discusses this creature as well in The Master of Game: “[s]he is a false beast and as malicious as a wolf. […] [T]hey are so cunning and subtle that neither man nor hounds can find a remedy to keep themselves from their false turns” (Edward, Second Duke of York 64, 67). Since this creature is so devious in this way, one might say that the fox represents the uncertainty that exists within the forest, which makes this space so difficult for man to traverse.

The description of the hunt for the fox in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight further illuminates the fox’s cunning ways and acts as an example of Edward’s previous point about the ease with which the fox leads hunters astray. Unlike the scene with the boar, where the men remain in formation until they corner the boar, this scene presents the hunters as having lost their perfect orientation from the beginning. Indeed, their pursuit of this creature is fraught with twists and turns, as the hunters and hounds consistently fail to capture it. This, in turn, causes the hunters to become aggravated, which can be seen through their curses directed toward the fox. Such reactions are quite different from those of the other hunts and can be attributed to civilized order being rebuffed by the wildness of nature, which indicates a failure of civilization. By the end of the first section detailing this hunt, the poet concludes, “[a]nd ye he lad hem bi lagmon,
the lorde and his meyny, / On this maner bi the mountes whyle myd-over-under” [and indeed he had led them astray, the lord and his company, / In this manner by the hills during mid-afternoon].

This quote confirms that the men have been led astray by this fox while also emphasizing the hunt’s difficulty by mentioning the amount of time it was taking to hunt just one creature. Since this hunt is still occurring over the course of mid-afternoon, it threatens the stability of civilization, as the presence of the dead fox is required by dinnertime for the sake of both hospitality and for Bertilak’s game with Gawain. It is thus through the fox’s trickery that their meal and the status of the game become uncertain.

Eventually, the fox is killed when the hounds capture the creature after a missed blow by a hunter’s sword. The fact that animals themselves are crucial in finally ending the hunt once again shows the blending between civilization and nature, as the hunters find themselves reliant on these admittedly domesticated creatures. Even so, the production of such hounds would have been dependent on the interactions of humans and nature, as they bred friendly creatures from wild beasts. Again, this reveals that human civilization and nature are intertwined.

In a way similar to these hunting scenes, the entrance of the Green Knight into the court of King Arthur illustrates an instance where the wildness of nature and the chivalry of civilized society interact in a significant way. Even within the Green Knight himself, one can see the existence of such a duality. Indeed, his complicated relationship with nature can be surmised through his external appearance. The hue of his garments and skin, described as “overal enker-grene,” is the most prominent feature of this Green Knight, as his title denotes (SGGK 150).

According to Derek Brewer in their article “The Color Green,” this color appears forty-four times in the text. Glossing by Battles, page 109, used for translation.
times in reference to the Green Knight followed by only nine other times throughout the rest of the work (Brewer 181). Green is thus very relevant to this character in particular, both within *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and outside of it: no other character in medieval literature possesses such a peculiar coloration of the skin besides two small children from an account by Ralph of Coggeshall who were later assumed to have been suffering from chlorosis⁹ (Brewer 182). The Green Knight thus exists as the only green character without an illness, making this oddity worth exploring.

According to Brewer, the color green signified many things during the Middle Ages, both positive and negative. For the most part, “[g]reen was […] felt to be an agreeable colour, associated with the spring of the year, pleasant to the eyes” (Brewer 184). On the other hand, this color also possessed a relationship with the supernatural, as, in Scottish mythology, green was associated with fairies and was therefore considered unlucky or even dangerous (Brewer 183). Because of these mixed meanings, Brewer concludes by stating that it is impossible to fully deduce the symbolism surrounding green in this work, while also recognizing that “the very greenness of the Green Knight allows him to be absorbed into some natural world, yet points also to a sense of its ultimate mystery” (Brewer 190). This latter statement seems to be a more assertive inference that, I believe, more appropriately represents the Green Knight through his greenness, since it connects him to nature, with the wildness and supernatural qualities that are associated with the natural realm.

Besserman also considers the aspect of greenness in “The Idea of the Green Knight,” which both supports the relationship between green and nature while also adding to the symbolic

⁹“The green sickness,” which involved anemia, iron deficiency, and, reportedly, greenish colored skin (Treffers).
aspects of the Green Knight. The mystery that Brewer describes as relating to the color green is further extended to the Green Knight in this article, through the illustration of the knight as possessing “ambiguity or ambivalence” (Besserman 222). Besserman additionally presents the Green Knight as such: “the Green Knight is best understood as a blend of two traditional figures in romance and other medieval narratives, ‘the literary green man’ and ‘the literary wild man’” (Besserman 220). Through this quote, Besserman more explicitly equates the color green and wildness, and, taken together, the articles by Brewer and Besserman imply that there exist interactions amongst green, nature, and wildness as it relates to the Green Knight. Indeed, nature and wildness are quite obviously intertwined, since wild animals generally make a natural setting, such as a forest, into their habitat. More relevant, however, is the existence of wild men in the forest, many of whom were exiled due to crimes or mental illness. The actions and qualities of these wild men are described as such: “they seem to attack all outsiders […] they are not properly dressed and are therefore subject to the natural elements […] they do not tame animals, but they behave like them” (Mameli 40). This perception of wild men is significant, as it portrays them as dangerous people who exist outside the laws of civilization and thus are prone to attack those who enter the forest. This quote also suggests that these wild men are considered to be more wild beast than man due to their behavior, making them antagonists to civilization. Thus, by depicting the Green Knight as a “literary green man” and “literary wild man,” Besserman implies that the Green Knight is a threat against both civilization, as a character associated with nature, and against law, as one who is wild. This wildness of the Green Knight later acts as a threat toward Gawain, who hails from a civilized setting, leaving him prone to the
Green Knight’s game as prey is to the hunter. Since the Green Knight is portrayed through this wild and natural imagery, however, the roles are reversed, with a wild hunter and a human prey.

Not only is the Green Knight perceived as dangerous due to his wildness, but his mythological qualities also provide a threatening aspect. As previously mentioned, a bizarre skin tone gives the knight an inhuman quality, and the particular color green is affiliated with the fairy realm. Beings like fairies, along with other supernatural creatures, are furthermore connected to nature in a way that is not merely due to the relationship between green and nature. Indeed, many of these beings made their homes in the forest. For example, in medieval Ireland, fairies were believed to have lived in hills, or síd, and abducted people to such places, as seen in “The Wooing of Étain.” Other mythological creatures, too, were said to have resided in natural environments that were outside the realm of human civilization. These supernatural beings added to the danger of settings such as the forest, due to their trickery and violence.

Additionally, it is not just the green hue of the skin that attests to the Green Knight’s supernatural quality: he is also, quite clearly, a giant. In the text, the poet emphasizes his height: “an aghlich mayster, / On the most on the molde on mesure hyghe” [a terrifying huge man, / The very greatest on the earth in measure high].

10 Though the first line could simply refer to the Green Knight being a large man, the second elaborates by stating that, in height, he surpasses the largest human. As a giant, the Green Knight would exceed the average man in feats of strength, making him dangerous to even the most powerful men of the court. It is thus through the Green Knight’s connections to nature, as one who is both wild and mythological, that his intentions within the court would be perceived as ominous, since his appearance encompasses both the danger and

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10 SGGK, lines 136-137. Glossing by Battles, page 37, used for translation.
mystery surrounding the forest. The mythological imagery also promotes allusions to the hunt, as this menacing quality surrounding such beings is partially attributed to their ability to abduct unsuspecting humans. This, in turn, presents humans as a sort of prey for the supernatural, which shows an agency of the natural over the civilized in certain cases.

It is important to note, however, that these nature related qualities do not represent the totality of the Green Knight’s character. Though it is not clarified until the end of the work, this Green Knight and Bertilak de Hautdesert are the same person. His appearance, however, shifts depending on the part that he is playing at a given time. While the Green Knight possesses odd visuals with his green skin and immense height, Sir Bertilak is, presumably, quite normal. Indeed, no one would suspect anything inhuman of this man, as Gawain does not even recognize him as the Green Knight when he enters Bertilak’s castle. Not only does Sir Bertilak differ from the Green Knight visually, but he also acts in accordance with civility and even chivalry. The courtesy of Sir Bertilak is most clearly exemplified through his treatment of Sir Gawain at the castle, where Bertilak “hym charred to a chambre, and chesly cumaundes / To delyver hym a leude hym lowly to serve” while providing him with “[r]yche robes” (SGGK 850-851, 862). In this way, Sir Bertilak acts in accordance with the graciousness expected of a lord, while also revealing the possession of fine goods like these “ryche robes” that are indicative of the material culture surrounding human civilization. There thus exists within this character himself a sort of juxtaposition between the imagery surrounding nature and the qualities of civilized society. In turn, this makes the character difficult to fully grasp, as “the Green Knight also fails to behave in a way that would allow us to extrapolate a single identity from his words and actions as either the Knight of the Green Chapel or Bertilak de Hautdesert” (Besserman 227). Indeed, the
complication in discovering a “single identity” within this character is due to a seemingly stark divergence in wild nature (for the Knight of the Green Chapel) and human civility (in the case of Bertilak de Hautdesert). Since these two qualities exist within the same person, however, one might instead assume that these qualities are perhaps less opposing than previously assumed. There is, in this case, an overlap between his characteristics: the Green Knight, in his creation through the magic of Morgan le Fey, is mostly comprised of the wild and supernatural, while Bertilak de Hautdesert mainly acts in socially acceptable terms to humans. Even so, there is an aspect of each within the other, indicating the sort of blending of nature and civilization that occurs within Bertilak during his hunts. In such a case, the Green Knight retains some of the civility of Sir Bertilak, even in this form, while still being predominantly representative of wild nature.

Since the Green Knight possesses such a duality while leaning more heavily to his nature-like qualities, it is interesting to explore the meaning behind his entrance into King Arthur’s court in these terms. To Mittman and Kim in “Monsters and the Exotic in Medieval England,” the Green Knight’s transition from his unknown origins (at least during this stage of the text) to the civilized court setting is indicative of an encroachment of nature upon civilization, which they describe in the following manner: “the Green Knight, the giant in this romance, has moved significantly from the realms of the exterior, the wilderness, the conquerable ‘other’ to the interior, the domestic spaces of court life” (Mittman and Kim 695). Significantly, they emphasize this wildness and the aspect of “otherness,” which would be exactly the perception with which any given character from Arthur’s court would regard this giant, green man. The poet confirms this view through the line, “[f]orthi for fantoum and fayryye the folk there hit
“demed” [thus an apparition and a supernatural being the folk there deemed it], showing that they also consider the Green Knight from a supernatural viewpoint. Following his arrival, the Green Knight inspires further wariness within the group through his actions. It appears as though the characters do not know what to expect of him, as King Arthur erroneously assumes that the knight desires a fight when he addresses the Green Knight as such: “Sir cortays knyght, / If thou crave batayl bare, / Here fayles thou not to fyght” (SGGK 276-278). A statement of this sort indicates two things: first, the Green Knight is presumed to be violent because Arthur’s first assumption is that he endeavors to fight the men of the court, and, second, since he does not desire a battle, his intentions are instead considered mysterious. Because the wilderness possesses both these qualities of danger and unknowability, the Green Knight is automatically associated with the natural to King Arthur and his court.

After Arthur’s declaration, the Green Knight reveals his true intentions: he wishes to play a Christmas game that requires one of Arthur’s men to swing an axe at the Green Knight’s neck. If the blow does not kill him, the knight who partakes in this game would be expected to journey to the Green Chapel the following year, where the Green Knight will return the favor. Following the request by the Green Knight, no one from King Arthur’s court volunteers to engage in the game. This is quite significant, as the men of Arthur’s court are considered to be some of the greatest and bravest in battle. By remaining silent, these men reveal their distrust of the Green Knight, which likely stems from both his appearance and the bizarreness of the game. Indeed, since they already established that he possesses a mythological appearance, the men would likely associate him with the trickery in which supernatural beings often engage. The game, to King

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11 SGGK, lines 240. Glossing by Battles, page 41, used for translation.
Arthur’s men, thus appears to be a trap that positions the Green Knight as a hunter attempting to lure his prey. The Green Knight’s encroachment on the court then acts as a reversal of hunting spaces, where the hunter originates from a presumably non-human setting and finds his prey within the realm of human civilization.

Eventually, Gawain reluctantly decides to participate in this game in the stead of King Arthur, whose offer to do so shames the knights of the court. The aforementioned fear of deception is justified after Gawain swings the axe, as the following occurs:

\[\text{T}he\text{ scharp of the schalk schyndered the bones,}\\And\text{ schrank thurgh the schyire grece, and schade hit in twynne,}\\That\text{ the bit of the broun stel bot on the grounde.}\\The\text{ fayre hede fro the halce hit to the erthe,}\\That\text{ fele hit foyned wyth her fete, there hit forth roled.}\\The\text{ blod brayd fro the body, that blykked on the grene.}\\And\text{ nawther faltered ne fel the freke never the helder}^{12}\]

\[\text{[The axe of the man severed the bones,}\\And\text{ cut through the white fat, and sliced it in two,}\\So\text{ that the bright steel bit the ground.}\\The\text{ supernatural being’s head from the neck hit to the earth,}\\That\text{ so many kicked it with their feet, where it rolled forth.}\\The\text{ blood burst from the body, that shone green.}\\And\text{ neither faltered nor fell the man nevertheless]}\]

Despite Gawain cleanly severing the Green Knight’s head, so that the green blood gushes from the gaping wound, the knight’s body remains upright and animated, indicating that he is still living. In this way, the Green Knight does not adhere to the biological laws to which humans are subjected. His blood flows green, which directly opposes the redness of human blood on the color spectrum while also following along with the aforementioned nature imagery. The fact that he remains standing after the blow provides quite an unsettling visual, as a strike of even mild

\[^{12}\text{SGGK, lines 424-430. Glossing by Battles, pages 49-50, used for translation.}\]
force should result in at least a stumble. Here, the Green Knight is positioned as something completely outside of humanity, making nature and civilization seem opposed.

Even so, this does not encompass the fullness of the situation, as nature and civility still blend together slightly in terms of the Green Knight’s actions. Though the Green Knight appears to have his own laws or codes to which he adheres, he also works within the standards set by civilized society as well. This can be seen after the Green Knight retrieves his head and speaks to Gawain, stating:

Loke, Gawan, thou be graythe to go as thou hettes,
And layte as lelly til thou me, lude, fynde,
As thou has hette in this halle, herande thise knyghtes.
To the Grene Chapel thou chose\textsuperscript{13}

[Look, Gawain, thou be ready to go as thou promised,
And seek as faithfully until thou me, knight, find,
As thou has promised in this hall, within hearing of these knights.
To the Green Chapel thou go]

Here, the Green Knight insists that Gawain must comply with the rules of the game. Significantly, he does so by appealing to chivalric codes upon which a knight stakes his reputation. He uses the term “hette,” or promise, two times, which emphasizes the fact that Gawain is now bound by his word. Additionally, his mention of the knights of the court places even more pressure upon Gawain to comply with the rules of the game, which shows that the Green Knight is aware of the value that humanity places on staying true to one’s word. In this way, the game itself, which mirrors the hunt, depends upon the laws of human society for its culmination, thus displaying that the Green Knight too relies on such laws to a certain extent and, in turn, is connected with civilization through his game. In an interesting way, the laws that

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{SGGK}, lines 448-451. Glossing by Battles, page 50, used for translation.
govern Sir Bertilak’s hunt also become pertinent here, though to a lesser degree, as both hunts utilize societal values in order to be successful. Overall, the combination of all these characteristics and actions of the Green Knight shows the intertwining between nature and human society within both himself and the court, so long as he is in it.

The final situation in which nature and civilization interact is shown through Gawain’s journey within the space of the wilderness, where he attempts to discover the location of the Green Chapel. In this situation, Gawain appears to act as a foil to the Green Knight: instead of a mostly natural being infiltrating a wholly civilized setting like the court of King Arthur, a knight from this court—one who can be perceived as perhaps the most chivalrous since he was the only one to agree to the Green Knight’s trial—enters into a wild and dangerous setting. In a similar way, however, the civilized and the natural initially appear to oppose one another, yet a direct opposition is complicated due to a slight blending between these two aspects.

The situation surrounding Sir Gawain’s entrance into the forest itself is quite intriguing, especially in conversation with other pieces of literature from the Middle Ages. Indeed, many who travelled into the forest either did not have a choice, as an exile, or willingly entered due to a trauma that caused them to flee from civilization. Both “The Life of Merlin” by Geoffrey of Monmouth and the tale *Sir Orfeo* provide examples of the latter situation. In “The Life of Merlin,” Merlin retreats to the forest following the deaths of his companions in battle. His reasons for fleeing society to live in the forest indicate potential mental illness—perhaps PTSD or depression\(^{14}\) (Geoffrey of Monmouth 244). Regardless of the specific mental illness, the existence of one would cause him to be considered unfit for civilization. Merlin’s wildness is

\(^{14}\) PTSD could have resulted from seeing the deaths of his friends. Depression is also a possibility, since he refuses to eat following this traumatic event.
emphasized, as Geoffrey claims, “[h]e became a wild man of the woods” while also comparing him to “a wild animal” (Geoffrey of Monmouth 244). His continuous refusals to return home imply his rejection of society. In a similar fashion, Sir Orfeo also retires to the forest after the fairy king kidnaps his wife, renouncing his kingship as he promotes his steward to rule in his stead (Sir Orfeo 205-206). Though his wildness is not explicated as clearly as Merlin’s, such a move from the highest position of law in human society to the lawlessness of the forest suggests a shift from the civilized to the wild. The poet further clarifies this through the stark juxtaposition of Orfeo’s former attire to his current clothing. Indeed, he once “hadde y-werd the fowe and griis” [had worn the variegated and grey fur] and possessed a bed covered in “purper biis” [purple linen]. This would have proven his high status, since fine fur would have been suitable for a king, and the rare and expensive purple dye of his linens was often associated with royalty during the Middle Ages (Melina). In contrast, when Orfeo enters the forest, he wears a “sclavin” [pilgrim’s mantle] with “no […] kirtel no hode” [no tunic or hood] and “dede him barfot out atte gate” [passed barefoot out of the gate]. An outfit of this sort, suggesting poverty, is indicative of a rejection of his former status, and, in turn, of civilization. In this way, both of these situations position Merlin and Orfeo as fitting more closely with the wildness of nature, since they do not adhere to the standards set by human society. Their entrance into the wilderness thus results in their becoming with the natural setting rather than moving against it.

Gawain, on the other hand, does not enter the forest on these terms; rather, he retains an aura of the civilized about him. Especially in contrast to Sir Orfeo, Sir Gawain attires himself in

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15 Sir Orfeo, lines 241 and 242. Glossing by Laskaya and Salisbury used for translation.

16 Sir Orfeo, lines 228-229 and 232. Glossing by Laskaya and Salisbury used for translation.
a manner indicative of his rank, as the *Gawain*-poet includes a passage detailing the “dublet of a dere tars” [doublet made of precious Tharsian silk] and “stel with luflych greves” [beautiful shin armor]¹⁷ that he wears upon his leaving of King Arthur’s court. By clothing himself in a way befitting of a knight, Gawain shows that his mentality has not shifted from that of a chivalrous knight to a more wild state. His ability to remain as an acceptable member of human society despite location could potentially be due to his sense of purpose in entering the wilderness. While Merlin and Orfeo plan to reside in the forest without an overall goal,¹⁸ Sir Gawain purposefully endeavors to find the Green Chapel due to a societal duty not to break his word. Additionally, the reasoning for his movement into the forest is to search for the Green Knight, which mirrors Sir Bertilak’s hunt for the elusive fox due to the difficulty in finding both beings. This, again, attaches Gawain’s quest to a mostly human activity. For this reason, Gawain is able to maintain his sanity and thus can be viewed as someone predominantly civilized who is infiltrating the wildness of the forest like a hunter.

To fully comprehend Gawain’s interactions within the forest, one must understand the history behind the location through which Gawain traverses. Bennett elaborates upon the historical background of this wild setting as such:

The land depicted by the *Gawain*-poet in describing his hero’s arrival in the Wirral and his journey across Cheshire to seek in the foothills of the Pennines his tryst with the Green Knight is far from the realities of the late fourteenth century. It was no wilderness inhabited by monsters […] it is essentially an imagined landscape of romance and adventure. […] At the time of the Black Death, forest jurisdiction continued to prevail over half the county, and there may have been some fear that wilderness would re-establish itself. Yet forest clearance

¹⁷ *SGGK*, lines 571 and 575. Glossing by Battles, page 56, used for translation.

¹⁸ Though Orfeo eventually finds his wife, this is more due to the luck of his encountering the fairy king’s hunting group rather than to a specific attempt to find her.
continued, and indeed in 1376 Wirral was disafforested. Of course, it may well be that in the imagination of the rest of England it was a pretty wild and rugged place [...], an image intensified by the region’s reputation for lawlessness. (Bennett 76)

This setting is thus quite interesting, as one can see the interactions between humans and the space of the forest that had constructed this area. Though humans had managed to conquer this space in a sense by removing the natural aspect, perceptions surrounding the forest remained, as it was still viewed as “wild” and “lawless.” This, in turn, emphasizes how truly dangerous and mysterious Wirral would have been in the context of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: if even the deforested space was perceived as so threatening, the aspects of wildness and lawlessness would have been compounded in the area when it still possessed its wilderness as it does in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Since Wirral in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* remains densely forested, the fears surrounding the wilderness can be extended to this area. One such cause of distress would be the fear of getting lost in the forest. According to Rudd, Gawain moves from a terrain with which he would have been familiar to one that becomes more and more unknowable as he moves further into the forest. Indeed, Rudd refers to the first part of his journey, where landmarks are specified by name: “he neghed full neghe into the Northe Wales. / Alle the iles of Anglesay on lyft half he haldes / [...] / Over at the Holy Hede, til he hade eft bonk” (Rudd 53; *SGGK* 697-698, 700). After crossing the ford, however, “the poem’s landmarks become progressively vague, so that having taken unfamiliar paths (‘gates straunge,’ 709) Gawain finds himself in ‘counrayes straunge’” (Rudd 53). The strangeness caused by a lack of awareness at one’s surroundings is then mirrored by Gawain’s inability to find the Green Chapel, showing that he is truly lost. This progression through the forest thus symbolizes “increasing unreality from the implied known of
Arthur’s court” (Rudd 62). Rudd’s assertion here pits civilization and the wilderness against one another due to their different levels of knowability. Since much of human society is based upon the necessity to know and understand, the “unreality” of the wilderness would mark it as a space that is mainly unsuitable for humans. 

Though getting lost in the woods can be quite the terror, it is only an indirect killer, as one may fall due to unknown terrain or starve should one be unable to locate food sources. The forest, however, provides more pressing dangers for humans like Sir Gawain, such as the wild beasts described in the following lines:

At uche warthe other water ther the wyye passed  
He fonde a foo hym byfore, bot ferly hit were,  
And that so foule and so felle that feght hym byhode.  
[...]  
Sumwhyle wyth wormes he werres, and with wolves als,  
Sumwhyle wyth wodwos that woned in the knarres,  
Bothe wyth bulles and beres, and bores otherwhyte,  
And etaynes that hym anelede of the heghe felle.  
[...]  
For werre wrathed hym not so much that wynter nas wors

[At each ford or other water where the knight passed  
He found a foe before him, if not it was a surprise,  
And that so foul and so fierce he was forced to fight.  
[...]  
Sometimes with dragons he fights, and with wolves also,  
Sometimes with wild men that lived in the crags,  
Both with bulls and bears, and boars at other times,  
And giants that pursued him of the high hill.  
[...]  
For fighting boxed him not so much that the winter was not worse]

Here, the passage refers to many dangerous creatures that Sir Gawain encounters. Some of these are real animals, like wolves, bulls, bears, and boars. Each of these beasts shares the commonality of being ferocious creatures that can easily kill a human. This section also includes

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19 *SGGK*, lines 715-717, 720-723, and 726. Glossing by Battles, pages 64-65, used for translation.
wodwos, or wild men, who provide an additional threat since they exist outside the laws of civilization and thus can attack humans who enter the forest without fear of repercussions. Lastly, Gawain is confronted by mythological creatures like dragons and giants, which are not only two of the most physically capable supernatural beings but are also representative of the strangeness of the wilderness due to their mythological status. Taken together, these creatures provide examples of the dangerous nature of the forest setting, and the fact that they appear at such regular intervals shows that such threats are unyielding. In addition, this scene culminates in Gawain’s belief that these creatures were but a minor threat in comparison to the unfavorable weather in wintertime. Indeed, while one can have at least some control over the creatures by killing them—at least if one possesses great prowess in battle like Gawain—one would still be prone to the weather since one cannot fight back against it. This, in turn, compounds the danger of the forest, as the lack of proper shelter can lead to one freezing to death. Thus, it is due to the uncivilized nature of the wilderness, with its wild creatures and absence of human structures, that humans would need to constantly struggle to survive.

The danger of the forest is also attested to since it acts as an obstacle on the hero’s journey. According to Classen, “the protagonist can only find his goal and master the task posed by the Green Knight once he has made his way through the wintry forest to the castle” (Classen 7). Indeed, Gawain’s quest would have been far less compelling in a space where any average person could survive. In this way, the creatures of the forest act as a test for Gawain, since they provide a mode through which Gawain can exhibit his knightly capabilities. His ability to vanquish these beasts, in turn, indicates a conquering of the forest space not unlike Sir Bertilak’s hunts. Additionally, the winter weather adds to the tumultuous setting in a way that exacerbates
the dangerous aspects, as a similar setting in the summertime would provide one less hindrance. In total, Gawain’s ability to survive in spite of all these impediments makes it seem as though the capability of traversing a forest like Gawain is an impressive feat—one that others could not accomplish. This further attests to the forest not being a space suitable for humans, since only an exemplary person like Gawain can conquer it without experiencing death.

Gawain’s interactions in the forest, however, are not fully a symbol of civilized society opposing and conquering wild nature. Despite Gawain seemingly being the consummate model of courtly society, he still does not embody this ideal perfectly. Indeed, these lines illustrating the events surrounding his interactions with the creatures and the winter occur over the course of less than one page, which shows that such interactions are less noteworthy for Gawain than they would be for other people. His actual ability to exist within the space of the forest while other humans cannot perhaps indicates a divergence with the social realm, since it is not an area fit for human habitation. Sopher explicates this apparent conflict between society and nature within a person in the article “The Landscape of Home.” This piece primarily considers the complexity of the concept of a “home,” but it is interesting to put it into conversation with the situation in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* by replacing the concept of home with society in a broader sense. Most pertinent is the following passage:

Here is a true opposition to home, an idea of “anti-home” that recognizes the tension and inner conflict of human existence, individual and social, the tension between order and freedom [...] To be rooted is the property of vegetables. Set against the myths of home and homeland, we find the myths that challenge them, the myth of the voyager, the adventurer, the mythic quest that takes one forth into and through the world. (Sopher 134-135)
“The mythic quest” that Sopher refers to here parallels Gawain’s journey through the wilderness for the purpose of finding the Green Chapel. He leaves the comfort of King Arthur’s court, a parallel to the “home” in Sopher’s work, which, in turn, separates him from the “order” that is implied by “home.” Furthermore, the movement of a voyager or adventurer like Gawain complicates the idea of “home” as he is not bound to a fixed place. His ability to move throughout this “anti-home,” or wilderness, without falling to the dangers to which the average person would succumb shows that he does not necessarily require “home,” or society, and thus can inhabit either space.

In addition, during his stay Sir Bertilak’s apparently civilized castle, Sir Gawain is shown to become slightly less exemplary of knighthood, which is significant since a transgression against one’s occupation would harm one’s civilized status. This misdeed occurs when Gawain’s accepts the girdle of Sir Bertilak’s wife. According to the lady, her girdle possesses a magical ability to prevent the wearer from succumbing to a fatal blow, which is something Gawain desires due to his belief that he is soon to be beheaded by the Green Knight. His acceptance of this gift, by itself, is not his transgression, however: it is his deceit in not giving the gift from Lady Bertilak to Sir Bertilak as he had promised. In this way, Gawain transgresses the standards of chivalry, which harms his reputation as a knight.

The appearance of the girdle also indicates a change in Gawain that connects him with nature. Indeed, this girdle is described in the following manner: “[g]ered hit was with grene sylke and with golde schaped” (SGK 1832). Here, we see the return of the color green, which was previously established to have an symbolic connection with the natural. By wearing this girdle to the Green Chapel, Gawain thus parallels the Green Knight in a sense, as both enter into
the other’s abode while wearing this color. In addition, Gawain’s use of this item that he believes possesses magical abilities implies an acceptance of magic, and, in turn, the wilderness with which it is often associated. By attiring himself in this fabric, Gawain attains an aspect of the natural. This acquisition becomes permanent for him, as his guilt from using the girdle causes him to wear it constantly as a reminder of his shame. In this way, nature and civilization once again blend together, this time within the character of Gawain. Though his guilt and the acceptance from King Arthur’s knights allows him to remain a part of human society, his mistake still imparts upon him a connection with nature that will never leave him.

Each of the scenes involving nature and civilization in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*—the three hunts, the Green Knight’s entrance into the court, and Gawain’s subsequent quest through the forest—displays that the border between the civilized and the wild are not always completely clear. While the act of hunting on the surface appears to indicate a conquering of the natural space by humans, sometimes the forest acts upon an individual in a way that forces them to take on more nature-like qualities, which is seen especially in the cases of the hunters and Sir Gawain. This movement of the human toward a more natural state gives the forest a sense of agency where the “anthropocentric vision” discussed by Rueckert is interrupted. In this way, both the natural and the civilized appear to conquer each other. Additionally, the introduction of the Green Knight and Sir Gawain into what are apparently opposing spaces parallel aspects of the hunt, as each seemingly hunts the other. Sir Gawain’s hunt in particular assists in explaining medieval perceptions regarding the forest: even though the forest possesses aspects of danger and uncertainty, which justifies the fears of this space, medieval life still relied upon engagements within this natural setting. Furthermore, what results from both of these hunts is a
necessity for engaging with the aspect less similar to the character: the Green Knight must utilize the rules of the court for his game, and Gawain must prove his ability to exist within the forest and let go of some aspects of his knightly duties before he can locate the Green Knight and attempt to survive his game. Overall, the hunts of the Green Knight and Sir Gawain show that the interaction between humans and nature is necessary in order for either space to exist alongside the other.
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