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The Green Knight, between *verdure* and *tryfles*

Book of Hours of Charles d'Angoulême, c.1480,
Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS latin 1173, fol. 3r, detail.

1. "The knyght in the enker grene" (*SGGK* 2477)[1]: A green knight at Arthur's court

The fourth poem in British Library MS Cotton Nero A x, since its first printing in the nineteenth century, has always circulated under the same consensual title: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Monochromatic knights were common figures in Old French Arthurian romances—a staple reading material in late fourteenth-century England. Michel Pastoureau considers them to be chromatic *topoi:* these unknown knights, fully armed and garbed in one single colour, challenge the questing hero, while their shield, garments, banner, horse caparison, all in one colour, can be spotted from afar. Their colour is often programmatic; red sometimes signifies bad intentions or otherworldly origins, black tends to signal an important character in disguise. Lancelot or Tristan appear as black knights when in hiding, while white knights are often older protective figures. Green knights are young and either bold or rude (or both), and their enthusiasm proves disruptive.[2] Red knights are the most common by far: Brault lists at least twenty-nine mentions in the Arthurian corpus, compared with twenty-three black knights, and only five green knights—Gawain only ever appears as a red knight in the Arthurian corpus.[3]

The poet springs the Green Knight's particular hue on his audience at the very end of a stanza ("And overal enker grene" 150), after a brief building up of narrative tension strictly contained by the stanza's final quatrain. This suddenness confirms the

[1] All quotations from the original Middle English text of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are from Ad Putter and Myra Stokes, *The Works of the Gawain Poet* (London; Penguin Classics, 2014).
[2] Michel Pastoureau, *Vert: Histoire d'une couleur* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2013), p. 80.
[3] Gérard J. Brault, *Early Blazon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 31-35.

marvellous status of this mountainous yet beautifully proportioned creature : “les apparitions du merveilleux se produisent souvent sans couture avec la réalité quotidienne mais surgissent au milieu d’elle”[4]. The phrase “enker grene” refers to an intense, saturated green, perhaps a dark version of the colour. Lines 150 and 2477 contain the only two occurrences of “enker” in Middle English, and the word boasts two competing etymologies: either a well-attested Icelandic intensifier, or Old French “encré”, used in conjunction with blue or green to describe textiles in inventories.[5]

The Green Knight is formulaically referred to as “the knyght/gome/mon in/of the [enker] grene” (377, 405, 549, 2227, 2259, 2296, 2477) alongside “the grene knyght” (390, 417). He aligns with the monochromatic knights of Arthurian romance—his identity remains a secret until the final beheading scene—and shares in the conventional disruptive nature of green knights: his beheading game is a threatening, ironic, and insolent challenge. He diverges from the chromatic *topos* only in two aspects: his complexion and his horse’s are exuberantly green too, and he bears no weapons nor armour. He is, as Simon Armitage puts it, “not kitted out for conflict” (271)[6], contrary to his literary forerunners, always ready to engage in jousting.

2. “The blod brayd fro the body, that blykked on the grene” (429): red knight *vs.* green knight?

Arming scenes in chivalric romances are the locus for heraldic discourse, when knights are identified thanks to their coat of arms, beginning with the base colour, then the various juxtaposed elements which form their heraldic descriptor.

The arming of Sir Geoffrey Luttrell in the Luttrell Psalter,
England, c.1320-1330, British Library, MS Additional 42130, folio 202v.

Yet, just as in the case of the Green Knight, the colour of Gawain’s attire is delayed late in the description of his equipment. The cloth on which his weapons are

[4] Jacques Le Goff, *L’imaginaire médiéval* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), p. 25.
[5] *Dictionnaire du Moyen Français*, *s.v.* vert II.A. http://zeus.atilf.fr/dmf/
[6] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (A New Verse Translation by Simon Armitage)*, New York: Norton, 2008.

laid out is “tulé” (568), a deep red, but no other colour is mentioned, despite tantalizing mentions of textile, including the knight’s tunic and ermine-lined cloak (570-572). His horse wears protective breast-armour and covers, and the poet insists that their ornamentation fits that of the saddle: “The apparayl of the payttrure and of the proude skyrtes, / The cropore and the covertor, acorded wyth the arsounes” (601-602), still without describing any of the heraldic decorations—quite a teaser for a medieval audience. When Gawain is presented with his shield, its background colour—the first element in heraldic descriptions of coats of arms—is mentioned at the very end of the line, after a final intensifier: “Then thay schewed hym the schelde, that was of schyr goules” (619). Gules is the heraldic word for red (from Old French *gueules*); Gawain’s clothing is red and incorporates representations of his badge, the gold pentangle: “Forthy the pentangle new / He bere in schelde and cote” (636-637), and the five point knot is shaped in bright gold “Ryally wyth red golde upon rede goules” (663). Gawain in *red* gules and *red* gold is ready to embark on his quest for the Green Knight in the green chapel. But how contrasted were these two colours in the eye of the medieval audience?

The poet seems to relish in this red/green pairing, and many contemporary critics insist on the shocking final image in the decapitation scene, that of the Green Knight’s blood gushing: “Blood gutters brightly against his green gown” (429). We are indeed familiar since the end of the nineteenth century with the associations suggested by the colour wheel, which teaches which primary colours to mix to obtain secondary ones (e.g. blue + yellow = green), and dictates which colours are complementary, contrasting, cool or warm, etc. Red and green stand on opposite sides of the wheel, one is warm, the other is cool.

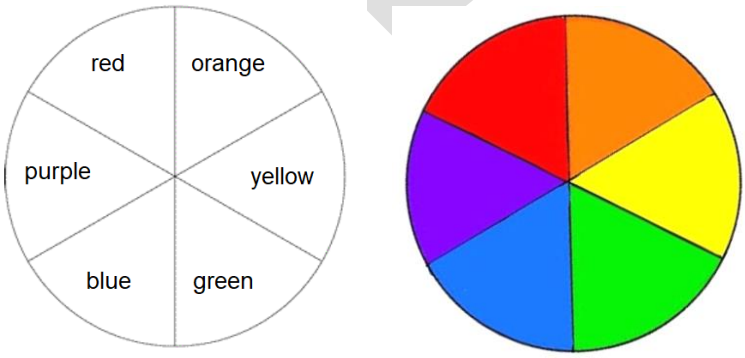

Fig. 1 The post nineteenth-century colour wheel.

Contrary to our contemporary colour conventions, green and red were not such distant colours in medieval times, when colours were ordered, according to pseudo-Aristotelian theories, as white, yellow, red, green, purple, and black—this sequence remained common knowledge until the end of the seventeenth century. Green even briefly becomes the ideal middle colour and, in the twelfth and thirteenth century, it becomes the most frequently prescribed colour for liturgical garments. Colours were paired with humours, thus promoting connotations which also prove very distant from our modern ones—blue, as the colour of air, was reputedly hot and dry…[7]

[7] Michel Pastoureau, *Vert: Histoire d’une couleur* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2013), p. 42, 55.

white	yellow	red	green	blue	purple	black

Fig. 2 The medieval colour sequence.

The suggestion of the knight's red blood running on his green garment was not jarring to a medieval mind-eye, and the two colours indeed combine to create a shiny effect ("blykked" 429). Similarly, the Green Knight's red eyes, which roll about mysteriously ("runischly" 304), fit in with his eyebrows which are "*blycande* grene" (305, my emphasis). Both green and red gain further brilliancy from their pairing: Gawain returns wearing "the *blykkande* belt" (2485) on his red cloak. Our two knights in red and green are not the polar opposites modern colour conventions make them.

3. "His vesture veraily was clene verdure" (161): A "veritably verdant" knight

The Knight's green cloak, lined with ermine, does not mark him necessarily as an embodiment of nature: it is rather a clearly identified luxury item—the Virgin Mary wears a similar mantle (and not a blue one) on a fourteenth-century English embroided cope[8]. The many textiles mentioned in the poem are also systematically vividly coloured—effective dyeing was a costly process in the Middle Ages. The adjective "bryght" is not applied solely to metal or white ermine fur, "clene" signals the pleasing proportions of a form but also the shine or freshness of a hue and not just the hygienic status of the garment or furnishing: "ful bryght" banners (117), "his bryght wedes" (861), "[a] bende […] of a bryght grene" (2517), "cortynes of clene sylk" (854).

Green is the colour of spring, and the "verdure" worn by the Green Knight is a *topos* of the elaborate French and Latin *reverdie* poetic genre which is imitated at lines 504-520, when "woods and grounds wear a wardrobe of green" (508). This new garment metaphor is the most common one in the *reverdie* canon, and French readers may be familiar with slightly later roundels by Charles d'Orléans where Time leaves aside his coat of wind, cold and rain to wear embroidery and Summer's servants precede their master and spread out his hangings of "fleurs" and "verdure" in the form of velvet carpets of grass[9]. The Green Knight's garment of "verdure" is the earliest occurrence of the word in Middle English; later, in financial accounts from the 1420s and 1430s, the word is used for textiles, perhaps embroidered panels or possibly tapestry hangings[10], as an equivalent of our "millefleurs".

The Green Knight is not just *green*, he is "veritably verdant" (161). Today, cloth can be obtained in almost any colour or shade, but medieval dyeing techniques differed from ours. Early Germanic and Scandinavian cultures commonly associated blue and yellow tinctorial plants to obtain a vibrant green colour. In the Middle Ages, this was no longer possible, as separate workshops dealt with blue and yellow, and

[8] On the Pienza Cope, see Michael A. Michael, ed., *The Age of Opus Anglicanum. Studies in English Medieval Embroidery* (London: Harvey Miller, 2016), fig. 52, p. 204-205.
[9] Roundels XXXI and XXX in Charles d'Orléans, *Poésies II : Rondeaux* (Paris : Librairie Honoré Champion, 1983), p. 307-308.
[10] *Middle English Dictionary*, *s.v.* verdure. https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/

mixing dyes was generally frowned upon as bordering on fraud. Many plants were commonly available to produce green dye, from nettle to beech bark, but they produce only a dull shade of green, which fades quickly from exposure to light or when washed. This may be one of the factors why so few *actual* coats of arms include green as a colour (only 5%) compared to literary heraldic creations—in the late Middle Ages, it is far easier to describe a green coat of arms than to create artefacts bearing a green device[11]. Heraldic designs were used on tapestries, clothing whether individual or meant as livery for servants, artefacts, etc., and choosing a green coat of arms could mean living surrounded with pale or faded textiles…

To a readership well versed in issues of Deluxe materiality, the knight's high-grade greenness signals both its exceptional and valuable quality and confirms his literary, make-believe nature. His green garment echoes Nature's new spring clothing from French and Latin *reverdie* poems, and its pure deep saturated hue is a technological tour-de-force bordering on the impossible. Just like Bertilak's castle, whose plan is so architecturally perfect and whose stone is so white (new Caen stone perhaps?) that "it appeared that the place was cut from paper" (802), like a banquet prop, the Green Knight too is a creature of paper and parchment, a literary being indeed.

4. "[T]ryfles […] [t]hat were embrauded abof, wyth bryddes and flyyes" (165-166): Embroidery and rhetoric

Medieval England was famous for its embroidery industry, so much so that *opus anglicanum* was often used throughout Europe in wills and inventories as a hyperonym for high quality needlework, regardless of its place of making. In London, both town craftsmen and, in the fourteenth century, royal embroiderers and tailors produced both religious and secular textiles. In the fourteenth century, *opus anglicanum* sometimes used gold backgrounds surrounding embroidered figures or scenes, but gradually it tended to use more and more isolated figures, sometimes appliqué (embroidered separately and sewn on), in vegetal or architectural frameworks.

The decoration of the Green Knight's and Gawain's clothing and horse trappings suggests a style similar to the *Broderie aux Léopards* in the Musée de Cluny (Cl. 20367)[12]—thirty-eight surviving fragments from a horse trapper made for Edward III in the 1330s, and probably very alike that depicted in the portrait of Sir Geoffrey Luttrell *c.*1325-1340 (British Library, Additional MS 42130, folio 202v)[13]. The *Broderie*'s base textile is a red silk velvet. The main figures are appliqué elongated heraldic leopards (Edward III's coat of arms was three leopards on a gules/red background), with silk thread for mouths, ears, claws and mostly surface couched gold thread over some linen padding for each lock of hair, so that the eyebrows and manes stand out in 3D ("enbrawded above" 166). Glass beads and rock

[11] Michel Pastoureau, *Vert: Histoire d'une couleur* (Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 2013), p. 45.
[12] Musée de Cluny website, https://www.musee-moyenage.fr/collection/oeuvre/broderie-aux-leopards.html and Christine Descatoire, *L'Art en broderie au Moyen Âge : Autour des collections du Musée de Cluny*, Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2019, no. 31.
[13] British Library, Digitised Manuscripts, http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Add_MS_42130

crystal are used for the eyes and also interspersed on the background, each surrounded with a row of tiny pearls. All around the leopards, a flat network of boughs harbours male and female figures, all in silver-gilt thread, a different thread than the one used for the leopards. This solid metal thread is pliable and resistant enough so that it can be sewn back and forth into the velvet background rather than being couched on the surface and secured with tiny stiches, the technique used for the cheaper and more fragile filé thread, which is made of a linen or silk core with thin foils of gold or silver wrapped around it.[14]

Similarly, the "trifles" (165) on the Green Knight's clothing, horse blanket and saddle are innumerable birds and butterflies in gold thread with green gems ("gai gaudi of green" 167) added on top of that "background of gold" (167). The eyes of the embroidered leopards in the Cluny Museum are in black and white, but a different horse housing, sewn for Edward III's palfreys in 1327-1328, is recorded as being made of red velvet, with gold leopards and parrots, six rubies for the leopards' eyes, and glass beads for the parrots'[15], suggesting an identical layering : a colour background textile / gold thread "above" / colour gem uppermost.

The gold stripes (or "barres") on the silk links securing the Green Knight's gold spurs or the girdle "trimmed with gold" (1832) are also embroidered—many London mercers' wives or "silkwomen" wove such "fringes, ribbons, laces and girdles" which were subsequently embroidered[16]. As for Gawain's helmet, it is attached to a decorative band at the sides and back,

> Enbrawden and bounden wyth the best gemmes
> On brode sylkyn borde, and bryddes on semes,
> As papjayes paynted pervyng bitwene,
> Tortors and trulofes entayled so thyk
> As mony burde theraboute had ben seven winter
> in toune. (609-614)

Periwinkles and "truloves" (Paris quadrifolia) are very simply structured flowers with five and four petals or leaves, commonly used in late-medieval sculpture or surface decoration, including wall-painting, earthenware tiling, etc.

Due to the alliterative constraint, they harbour "paynted" (represented or portrayed) parrots and "entayled" (engraved) turtledoves, but the medium discussed is undoubtedly embroidery: women supposedly laboured "in town" seven years over that embroidered silk band supplemented with precious stones. Highly realistic birds were indeed portrayed in manuscript margins and in the framework of embroidered items from the mid-fourteenth century or the end of the fourteenth-century[17], and one extant

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[14] Clare W. Browne, Glyn Davies, Michael A. Michael, and Michaela Zöschg, eds., *English Medieval Embroidery: Opus Anglicanum* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016) figs. 9, 11 and catalogue no. 51; gold thread is discussed p. 10-11; 3D effects p. 19.

[15] Michael A. Michael, ed., *The Age of Opus Anglicanum. Studies in English Medieval Embroidery* (London: Harvey Miller, 2016), p. 54.

[16] Clare W. Browne, Glyn Davies, Michael A. Michael, and Michaela Zöschg, eds., *English Medieval Embroidery: Opus Anglicanum* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), p. 41.

[17] Pages 363-393 in the Sherborne Missal, *c*.1390-1400, British Library, Additional MS 74236 each contain one detailed realistic bird portrait; for images of the Missal, see Janet Backhouse, *The Sherborne Missal* (London: The British Library, 1999) and *The Sherborne Missal: Reproductions of Full Pages and Details of Ornament*, introd. J.A. Herbert (Oxford: The Roxburghe Club, 1920) https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k1504438f/f10.item.

English notebook from the 1390s contains models for such birds (including parrots and doves), the human figures in the *Broderie aux Léopards*, and many more devices[18].

The poet suggests the abundance and luxurious display of these "trifles" using two distinct rhetorical techniques. The gold ones on green background are too numerous to be precisely listed, whereas we know exactly which species of birds are stitched onto Gawain's neckband, despite its diminutive size—suggesting that the rest of his clothing and his horse coverings contain many more such instances of portrait embroidery. Trifles in the fourteenth century referred not only to costly decorations added to the surface of textiles, but also a variety of tassels, pearls, baubles, which were often added to clothing or accessories.[19]

The stitching of images and gems provides an apt metaphor of the rhetorical creation process, viewed by medieval authors as ways to decorate and improve the *inventio*'s rough material. The poet lists a suggestive variety of embroidered artefacts supplemented with gems—in his notes, Ad Putter lists Guinevere's canopy 78-80, the green clothing 166-167, Gawain's neckband 609-614, the heraldic cognizance 2026-2028[20]. Other added and supplementary "trifles" include the gold bells on the lace knotted into the green horse's mane (195)[21] or the enamelled pendants and plates on the green horse's trappings (168-170). Enamel was commonly used on late medieval Deluxe horse metal equipment.

A particularly expensive type of enamel, émail de plique, translucent enamel on gold, produced exclusively in Paris in the 1380s and 1390s, serves as a compare for the Green Knight and his horse's colouring, a true "mervayle" (233) in its own right: "grener hit semed, / Then grene aumayl on golde glowande brighter" (235-236). This exceptional Deluxe enamel, most often used for small plaques sewn onto gloves or clothing, is mentioned *only* in conjunction with the Green Knight's fairy-like hue. The *Gawain* poet writes for true connoisseurs, and does not presume to suggest that the horse's trappings could ever be decorated in plique technique—an unheard of and most implausible extravagance. His knowledgeable handling of embroidery and metalwork presents his audience with the very best Deluxe craftsmanship *possibly* owned on English soil. His art aligns with poetics of abundance and luxury, not Cockaygne-style excesses.

[18] The Pepysian Sketchbook is held by Magdalene College, Cambridge (Pepys MS 1916), for black and white images see M.R. James. 'An English Medieval Sketchbook, no. 1916 in the Pepysian Library, Magdalene College, Cambridge,' *The Volume of the Walpole Society* (1924-1925): 1-17 and plates; for some Pienza cope bird details see Kay Staniland, *Embroiderers* (London: The British Museum Press, 1991), p. 26, and Michael A. Michael, ed., *The Age of Opus Anglicanum. Studies in English Medieval Embroidery* (London: Harvey Miller, 2016), p. 28.

[19] For an instance of a purse with pairs of lovers and tassels, made in Paris in the fourteenth century, 16 x 14 cm, Hamburg, Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe (Inv. 56,137), see Kay Staniland, *Embroiderers* (London: The British Museum Press, 1991), p 43.

[20] Ad Putter and Myra Stokes, *The Works of the Gawain Poet* (London: Penguin Classics, 2014), p. 648 (note to lines 609-614).

[21] Small round jingle bells in precious metal or very cheap alloys of lead were worn and carried by all ranks of society, only the expensive gold ones mentioned here have a clear sound.

Émaux de plique plates (to sew on gloves) 3cm x 3cm,
made in Paris c.1300, Paris, Musée de Cluny (Cl. 21386, Cl. 21387).

5. "Folden in wyth fildore aboute the fayre grene" (189): Green interlaced with gold

Interlace, the most basic form of embroidery, has been identified by Eugene Vinaver, the editor of Malory's works, as the most telling structural characteristic of romance[22]. Adeline Bartlett's influential analysis of narrative patterns in Pre-Conquest epic English poetry relies on an extensive analogue with tapestry narrative techniques.[23] Early medieval poems pay tribute at some point to the etymology of the text as *textus*, woven material. In the alliterative epic *Beowulf*, copied down *c*.1000, to speak is *wordum wrixlan* (to interlace words).

This image is not always explicitly developed in late medieval texts, but in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, interlace programmatically warrants textual stability "loyal letters […], once linked, […] last[…] loud and long" (35-36)—reminding us that stitching and embroidery too was sometimes used, when all else failed, on parchment folios, to repairs slits or breaks in the page. On a narrative structural level, the description of Bertilak's lady and the old hag holding hands (947-969) constantly shifts from one to the other, sometimes mid-line, and the two women share the stanza's final quatrain, a fitting ending to a tightly woven double portrait. The *Gawain* poet also makes his audience focus on detailed instances of interlace: the green horse's mane is not just an extension of his master hair and beard, it is intricately associated with "fildore" (189), solid gold thread, which is applied on textile backgrounds using the couché technique described earlier. The overall effect (or the plaiting formula) is indeed "green over gold, green over gold" (190), and the medieval poet's draws his audience's attention to every single strand of equine hair: "Ay a herle of the here, an other of golde", which suggests that this gold thread is indeed affixed in couché stitches.

With his obsessive attention to detail, the *Gawain* poet's mentions of embroidery and interlace do not just pay lip service to the extraordinary quality of late

[22] "At the heart of it all lies […] an understanding of the great aesthetic possibilities of digression and recurrence, and the feeling of continuity and movement maintained throughout the vicissitudes of individual adventures", Eugene Vinaver, *The Rise of Romance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 92.
[23] Adeline Courtney Bartlett, *The Larger Rhetorical Patterns in Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935).

medieval English needlework while flattering his audience's appetite for and expertise in Deluxe apparel, although his matter may be said to be that of late medieval luxury rather than that of Britain. Embroidered textiles and interlaced strands make the green and the red alike shimmer with gold, and suggest a model for rhetorical amplification by systematic layering, as well as providing, with their pendants, trifles, bells and baubles, numerous visual counterparts for the rhyming wheel suspended at the end of each alliterative stanza.

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