‘Now þenk wel…’: Missing the metacognition in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

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Enthusiasts of chivalric adventure….

Are you, like the mighty and renowned king, yearning to hear boasting of ‘an outrage awenture of Arthurez wonderez’? Relax then, sit back, and enjoy another bold tale of knightly derring-do: ‘Sir Gawain and the Green Knight’ (SGGK).

But wait ….

What if the hero turns out to be not so heroic after all? What if his valour and honour, his reputation and his ‘word’, are not really as steadfast and settled as we assume them to be? What if the story does not end as it should, following the traditional success pattern we know and hold dear? What if the semantic field used to describe Sir Gawain and his tale of heroism, including words such as ‘bold’, stiff’, and ‘proud’, starts to assume a distinctly ironic, ambiguous, *weird* air? What if the golden pentangle is fallacious and the acclaimed Arthurian court - its ethos and its ‘history’ (of which Gawain is the paragon) is likewise false: a foolish or cynical fictional fabrication intended to simultaneously delight and dupe a gullible audience? What if a hard-to-spot marginal illustration in the poem’s sole extant manuscript[1] appears to suggest that all is not what it seems, and that everything important

[1] The illustration is of a face that appears to be frowning, or looking sceptically, at line 625, a key point in the poem, in terms of number symbolism (5x5x5x5), which introduces the description of Gawain’s pentangle symbol. See https://digitalcollections.ucalgary.ca/archive/Gawain-Manuscript-2R3BF1FK246CX.html .

you are led to believe about this ‘stori stif and stronge’ (SGGK, 33) is wrong, and, more importantly, *so is your way of thinking about it*? Feeling unsettled yet?

This paper investigates what may be considered the poem’s ‘true’ challenge – and it is an intellectual one – carefully designed for *you*, its audience, as well as its protagonist, Sir Gawain. Are you ‘stif’ and ‘bolde’ enough to accept it and embark on an analytical quest which will disturb your preconceived assumptions about heroism, (hi)story, and hermeneutics? Or, do you prefer to remain gullible: settled and ‘at home’ in your ‘sumquat childgered’ understanding? Do you accept the challenge? Will you allow the poem to stimulate your intellectual scepticism? Are you prepared (metaphorically, at least) to ‘lose your head’ in the process?

Reading the poem in its original text, it is apparent that one of its chief concerns is with metacognition: awareness and understanding of one’s own thought processes (*Oxford English Dictionary, OED*[2]), and, furthermore, that the poem assumes the role of directing its protagonist and audience towards an enhanced metacognitive state[3]. Consider, for example, the narrator’s cautionary advice to Gawain as he begins his yearlong adventure of self-discovery once the Green Knight’s decapitated head reminds him of his responsibilities regarding the rules of the game. The narrator advises Gawain to ‘þenk wel’ (SGGK, 487) – to think well, or as the *Middle English*

[2] Online edition: *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989-).
[3] For a justification of using modern theories to study and translate medieval texts, see Michelle Warren, “Modern theoretical approaches to medieval translation." *A Companion to Medieval Translation* (2019): 165-174. Although the poet would not have been aware of the term, or modern theory, of metacognition, this paper argues that the poem demonstrates a concern with the act of thinking about thinking (which we can now name as metacognition) in order to promote intellectual scepticism and challenge what we now understand as the binary fallacy. See also Leah Tether, "Perceval’s Puerile Perceptions: The First Scene of the Conte du Graal as an Index of Medieval Concepts of Human Development Theory." *Neophilologus* 94, no. 2 (2010): 225-39.

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Dictionary (MED) construes it: to successfully 'exercise the faculty of reason'. Here, at this crucial point in the narrative, as he begins to comprehend the enormity of his task, Gawain is being directly challenged to *think about how he thinks* – to engage in an exercise of metacognition. As this paper hopes to show, there are numerous other examples in the original text which reveal the poem's interest in different ways of cogitation, including scepticism, critical discernment, and binary versus nuanced thinking. Indeed, the final words of the manuscript draw attention to the way that its *audience* contemplates either the meaning of the story, its symbolism, or even the act of cognition itself: 'Hony soyt qui mal pence'. Thus, I argue that, from beginning to end, the poem is suffused with examples of the poem's metacognitive concern - with *how*, not merely *what*, its characters and readers *think*.

Unfortunately, as we shall see, the potentially crucial theme of metacognition is in serious danger of being entirely lost in modern translation, particularly in the version offered by Simon Armitage, which is currently endorsed as the preferred text for French students studying for the agrégation examination. While Armitage himself explains that his translation 'is not an exercise in linguistic forensics or medieval history' (Armitage, viii) and that 'in trying to harmonize with the original rather than transcribe every last word if it, certain liberties have been taken' (Armitage, viii), it seems clear that this modern rendition of the poem, like others, unsurprisingly loses key elements of the original which significantly diminish the reader's experience. Putter, for one, has emphasized the importance of reading the poem in an original-language edition, noting that 'Armitage's translation (or any other modern English translation) is no match for the original' (Putter,

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2). In respect of this paper's argument, take, for example, the aforementioned counsel by the narrator to the protagonist to 'þenk wel'. *MED* offers the definition of 'þenk' as 'think', or 'to exercise reason', that is, to 'cogitate'. Barron's dual text translation of the phase as 'take good heed' (Barron, 57), suggests that Gawain should pay careful attention to his situation: a rendition which, while it begins to move away from a tight focus on thinking, remains reasonably connected to it. However, Armitage renders the phrase thus: 'But mind your mood, Gawain' (Armitage, line 487), which is a significant alteration, ameliorated only partially by the following line: 'Keep blacker thoughts at bay' (Armitage, line 488). The crucial difference in this rendering of 'þenk wel' is that it fails to recognise the poem's specific interest in the way that Gawain, and others involved in the story, are *thinking* throughout the adventure. This is palpably not the case with Armitage's translation, with how they are *feeling* by warding off 'blacker thoughts'. In the original text, it seems clear that the narrator is asking Gawain to focus on how effectively he reasons: i.e. how he thinks well. Therefore, Gawain enters a metacognitive process in which his understanding of himself, of his heritage, of his 'home', of his virtue: essentially, his whole actuality, or 'trawþe' (as symbolised by the pentangle) – is challenged. From this existential crisis, he learns to *think differently*: something that Arthur notably fails to achieve during the course of the yearlong plot. Again, in this respect, the nuances of the original text are lost in Armitage's rendition, as Fitt 2 begins:

> This hanselle hatȝ Arthur of auneturus on first,
>
> In ȝonge ȝer, for he ȝerned ȝelping to here. (SGGK, 491-2)

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Arthur's yearning, his longing, to hear of bold deeds, echoes his previous 'sumquat childgered' (SGGK, 86) desire (before the entry of the Green Knight to Camelot) to hear, as Barron translates it: 'a novel tale of some perilous incident, of some great wonder, which he could believe true ….' (Barron, 37). The original text gives us the line 'þat he myȝt trawe' (SGGK, 94), drawing attention to the way Arthur thinks – he wants to believe something to be true; he yearns for affirmation of that 'truth'. *MED*'s offerings on the word 'trawe' are highly suggestive of the metacognitive concern of the poem. They range from the seemingly anodyne 'to have trust/confidence in', to the more potentially censorious, 'be overconfident' and 'to be of a certain opinion, form an opinion, exercise one's judgment, to think' in a way that is potentially foolish, but certainly not thinking well: 'erroneously [or] wrongly impute … to have an unfounded expectation, to hope in vain'.

The subtle implications suggested by the original text - that Arthur's credulous naivety is a way of thinking that Gawain must break away from and learn, as a consequence of his adventure, to think differently from his king - is surely one of the key aspects of the poem.[4] Essentially, Arthur is depicted as thinking in an uncritical manner, using a binary way of reasoning, while Gawain learns, through his rather painful lesson from the Green Knight, to think in a more nuanced, sophisticated way – a way the poem proposes as 'wel' (SGGK, 487). Once again, however, this distinction is lost in Armitage's translation: 'This happening was a gift – just as Arthur had

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[4] Although, it could be argued that Gawain does not seem to fully comprehend the 'lesson' taught by the Green Knight at the poem's end.

asked for/and had yearned to hear of while the year was young'. (Armitage, lines 491-2).

We need, therefore, to be careful when relying on modern translations to reflect the complexities of the poem, particularly in the subtle ambiguities the original text presents though its deliberately ambiguous use of key words such as 'bolde', 'stif', 'pryde', and 'þenk'. Otherwise, much of its richness is lost, and over-emphasis on the 'warp and the weft' (Armitage, viii) of its alliteration leads to a potential warping (in its other sense) of one of its key themes: that 'truth', knowledge, or understanding are not to be construed in binary terms. Rather, the poem delicately proposes a nuanced way of reasoning: a sceptical, open-minded, way of thinking critically, as the style of cognition it refers to as 'thinking well'. Gawain's journey is one of metacognition, and so is the journey of the reader. Arthur, it seems, is set to remain stuck in his own private loop of craving constant reaffirmation of his own naïve, binary, 'sumquat childgered' state of mind and beliefs.

In this short paper, it is impossible to cover in detail all of the interesting aspects of the poem which suggest its preoccupation with binary and nuanced cognizance; nevertheless, there are some pertinent examples which deserve mention. The poem's concern with ways of thinking is demonstrated from beginning to end, ranging from the introduction of the true, yet treasonous figure of Aeneas in the proem; through Arthur's childish reasoning at Camelot (both before and after the arrival of the Green Knight); to the ambiguous figure of the challenger himself (his challenge at the opening of the poem, and his actions and words at the Green Chapel); to the hero's return at the end of the poem; and even encompassing the unsettling final words of the manuscript: '*Hony soyt qui mal pence'* – a phrase which

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has the potential to mean, ‘Shame on him who thinks ill of this’, or even, perhaps, ‘Shame on him who *thinks badly, or wrongly’* – a very interesting ambiguity given the poem’s evident interest in metacognition[5]. Thus, the final words of the manuscript reiterate the poem’s concern with the act of thinking. However, before we look at one of these examples (the figure of Arthur) in closer detail, we need to ground our analysis in a clearer understanding of binary and nuanced thinking.

The binary fallacy may be defined as the predisposition to understand things simply – in black and white terms, which do not allow for the inherent nuances and complexities in a situation, notion, or character. Moreover, it comprises categorising people and ideas into two disparate and mutually exclusive groups, without allowing for the option of a spectrum, or middle ground. Essentially, binary thinking precludes nuanced, and therefore, critical thinking or scepticism. It is characterised by its desire to understand things as simple, unequivocal truths. This is the type of thinking Arthur demonstrates throughout the poem, which is illustrated by his childish yearning for the truth of his reputation to be reaffirmed at the start of the plot, his embarrassing misunderstanding of the Green Knight’s challenge to the Round Table, his foolish advice to Gawain to deal a beheading blow, and his inability to fully comprehend the sophisticated lesson Gawain has learned on his return to Camelot at the end of the story. When he laughs at Gawain’s shame and misappropriates the girdle as a symbol of his court’s honour,

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[5] See different translations – Barron places ‘y’ before ‘pense’ – making it mean something different. There are numerous, suggestive ways of construing ‘*mal*’. This motto may be provided with an implicit indirect object, represented by “y” as it has been laid down to us. However, the original version of the motto may be without the “y”, as found in ‘Wynnere & Wastoure’. For further discussion and references on the inclusion of the motto in the manuscripts, see footnote 12 of this paper as well as Joel Fredell, "The Pearl-Poet Manuscript in York." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 36, no. 1 (2014): 1-39 (page 32).

Arthur is demonstrating the flaws of a binary thinker, unable to construe the nuances of reality, but preferring to remain 'at home' in his simplistic way of reasoning. Thus, the king is guilty of being under the illusion of the false dichotomy – a way of thinking which limits the options available. This fallacy asserts that one option must be true (see the echoes in the description of Arthur wanting to hear a tale that he might believe true at the start of the poem). This form of cognition is an oversimplification because it excludes viable alternatives and presents only extreme, absolute choices (like the one he offers Gawain as his nephew wields the axe), when in fact there may be many (see the Green Knight's actions at the Green Chapel as the clearest example). Arthur, and his nephew Gawain, thus fall into a rationality trap at the start of the adventure, with the latter's experiences leading him to a new consciousness, or metacognition, while the former remains notably set in his fallacious, binary dichotomous mind-set.

As he awaits the Christmas festivities, Arthur is described with a short phrase, which has significant importance: 'sumquat childgered' (SGGK, 86). While critics have focused on the potential meaning of the word 'childgered', and translators have treated it differently through the years, I argue that the key word here has been rather overlooked: 'sumquat'. Being the Middle English precursor to 'somewhat', the word is an affront to binary thinking. It forces the reader to contemplate things in a nuanced way because it means 'a certain amount' (*OED*), i.e. to some extent, rather than completely. How wonderfully ironic that the poem uses the word to describe a king who is palpably incapable of thinking in this way! If we take the word to mean understanding something in a flexible way which allows for subtleties and discernments, then the placing of the adjective 'sumquat' before 'childgered'

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is, quite plausibly, a deft joke by the poet, laced with irony, because Arthur is shown to be entirely 'childgered' in his cognition: he does not comprehend the notion of 'sumquat'. 'Childgered', is translated by both Armitage (line 86) and Barron (37) as 'boyish', but this rendition loses the disparaging implication that the king's cognition is unsophisticated, puerile, childish – dare we even say, 'green'?

How can we assert the surely pejorative implications of 'sumquat chidgered' with confidence? Leaving aside the court's admonition of Arthur as Gawain sets out on this quest (SGGK, lines 682-6), the words and actions of the king in response to the challenge of the Green Knight demonstrate his naïve, binary thought processes most clearly. Failing to appreciate that the ambiguous figure before him comes in peace, in order to play a Christmas game, the 'bold king' does not seem to understand the situation, nor read the signs that warfare is not this visitor's intention: 'Yet he had no helm nor hauberk either, and no gorget, nor any plate armour at all, and no spear or shield to thrust or parry with, but in one of his hands he had a spray of holly …' (Barron, 43)[6].

Even when the Green Knight explicitly sates his position, thus: 'You may be assured by this branch that I carry here that I come in peace, and seek no contention … I wish no strife'[7] (Barron, 45-7)[8], the king misconstrues it entirely: 'Sir, courteous knight, if you are asking for single combat, here you will not fail to get a fight' (Barron, 47)[9]. The king, it seems, is incapable of

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[6] See also Armitage, lines 203-6.
[7] Perhaps his statement may also be taken as somewhat ambiguous or insincere, because of the axe
[8] See also Armitage, lines 265-6.
[9] See also Armitage, lines 275-8.

comprehending what this situation entails. He thinks only in terms of binary 'truths', which are show here to be fallacies.

In addition to his initial misreading of the Green Knight's challenge, Arthur instructs Gawain to act in a way that shows he is unable to consider more moderate, alternative, nuanced ways of delivering the axe blow in the Green Knight's game. This binary fallacy construes only an extreme solution to the issue – a delusion that is surely meant to be juxtaposed with the merciful actions of the Green Knight at the Green Chapel:

> Then the king commanded the knight [Gawain] to rise from the table; and he promptly arose, came forward courteously, knelt down before the king and took the weapon. And he graciously surrendered it, and lifting up his hand, gave him God's blessing, and cheerfully urged him that his heart and his hand should both be resolute. 'Take care, cousin,' said the king, 'that you give one stroke, and if you deal with him properly, I fully believe that you will survive any blow he shall offer you afterwards.' (Barron, 51)[10].

The original text gives us; 'redeȝ hym ryt' (SGGK, 373) for 'deal with him properly' (Barron) showing that Barron and Armitage appear to have lost a key element of the text in their renditions. Armitage's version, with its overriding emphasis on alliteration, omits the phrase entirely: 'Take care young cousin, to catch him cleanly' (Armitage, line 372). The verb 'redeȝ' is significant here. It is at least possible that it denotes, as the seventh entry in the *MED* offers, to 'read', to perceive something or someone; discern; deduce; grasp the meaning of. A suitable alternative to the meaning of the word in this context in the *MED* is difficult to find. In that case, the king is saying to Gawain that, if he understands the Green Knight's challenge/words correctly, that is, if he 'reads him right', he will survive any subsequent blow.

[10] See also Armitage, lines 366-74. The original text is *SGGK*, lines 366-74.

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Clearly, Arthur himself is not capable of 'reading the situation right' here, and his advice for Gawain to take an extreme option – to decapitate the Green Knight – is typical of the dichotomous fallacy. He cannot comprehend any possible, somewhat measured, alternative.

Thus, Arthur and Gawain's actions at Camelot are proven to be the foolish, fallacious reasoning of binary cognition at the plot's climax in the Green Chapel. Not only does the Green Knight avoid the extremes of delivering a beheading blow with his axe, he also explains to Gawain that there is a more nuanced way of thinking that would be of benefit to him as he struggles to come to terms with his self-loathing for cowardice and covetousness. The Green Knight explains that Gawain was 'a little at fault' (Barron, 157), or as the original text gives it: 'Bot here yow lakked a lyttel' (2366)[11]. This phrase is a poignant echo of the description of Arthur as 'sumquat childgered', in that 'a little' and 'somewhat' are synonymous in respect of suggesting a nuanced way of understanding. Not everything can be understood as an absolute truth – not the history of Britain, the reputation of Arthur and his men, the golden pentangle of Gawain, or even words such as 'bold', often used to describe both the king and his nephew. These things are unsettled and therefore unsettling to Gawain's mind, which struggles to think in a sophisticated and nuanced way. There are shades of meaning which the binary thinker, such as Arthur cannot grasp, and which, because of his testing adventure, Gawain is only beginning to perceive.

When the hero returns, somewhat confused, to Camelot at the end of the tale, and presents the girdle to his king as a sign of the shame he feels,

[11] See also Armitage, line 2366.

Arthur adopts the girdle in typical binary thinking fashion, as a symbol of the renown of the Round Table. Once again, it seems, the king is foolishly misreading the situation. As the poem ends, a motto in French concludes the manuscript and it too draws attention to the theme of metacognition: 'Hony soyt qui mal pence'[12]. The line is traditionally translated as 'shame on him who thinks evil of it', but that seems to be the Garter motto, which includes 'y', rather than the text in the manuscript, which excludes it. If the 'y' is missing from the original, is it not too wild a conjecture to suppose that the motto translates more accurately as, 'Shame on he who thinks wrongly'? If so, it is just another, highly suggestive, example of the poem's profound concern with the act of thinking – and of its advice for us, its readers, as well as its protagonist, to 'þenk wel'– a key theme which is in danger of being warped, or lost entirely, in modern translations.

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[12] This appears to be a scribal addition, though it remains a possibility that the original poem included it at the end. For further details and references, see Olivier Simonin, *Sire Gauvain et le Chevalier Vert*. Le Livre de Poche, 2024, p. 232. Also, Jessica Brantley, *Medieval English Manuscripts and Literary Forms*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022, pp. 223-4; Arthur Bahr, "Chasing the Pearl-Manuscript: Speculation, Shapes, Delight," in *Chasing the Pearl-Manuscript,* University of Chicago Press, 2024, Chapter 8.