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'Into a forest ful dep, þat ferly watz wylde': Gawain and the fairy tale forest

As Gawain rides out on his quest to the Green Chapel, the apparent safety and order of Camelot is soon left behind for the unpredictable, unmappable 'wyldrenesse of Wyrale'. His spiritual journey is mirrored by his altogether more earthbound travels across the wintry wooded landscape, where he battles wolves, dragons, woodwos, giants and bears alongside snow, sleet and icicles. But as elsewhere in Breton *lais*, the wood is a metamorphic space, capable of changing from murky to magical (and back again) as the light changes. As with Gawain's encounters with the Green Knight himself, the poem's rides through the natural world contain as many enchantments as dangers, from the 'greuez grene' of springtime to dawn hunts sparkling with frost. And this verdant wilderness also offers Gawain freedom and growth, changing him upon his return to Camelot as surely as it does the protagonist of any forest-set fairy tale.

Following a breadcrumb trail through real and imagined forests, this paper beckons you into the trees for a fresh look at *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*'s sylvan surroundings: what role does the forest play in fairy tales and folklore (and horror)? How is Gawain affected by the forest? And why is the forest such an effective space for transformation?

As we see in Fitt II, the Gawain poet describes this forest in some detail when Gawain sets off on his journey:

'Bi a mounte on þe morne meryly he rydes
Into a forest ful dep, þat ferly watz wylde,
Hiȝe hillez on vche a halue, and holtwodez vnder
Of hore okes ful hoge a hundredth togeder;
Þe hasel and þe haȝþorne were harled all samen,
With roȝe raged mosse rayled aywhere'

['Next morning he moves on, skirts the mountainside,
descends a deep forest, densely overgrown,
with ancient oaks in huddles of hundreds
and vaulting hills above each half of the valley.
Hazel and hawthorn are interwoven,

decked and draped in shaggy moss.']

As readers will probably know from their own experiences with fairy tales, a large number of them take place in the forest. Well-known stories such as Little Red Riding Hood involve their protagonists leaving the safety of a familiar environment in order to venture into the trees. In the 1857 edition of the Grimms' *Kinder und Hausmärchen*, more than half of the tales are wholly or partially set in forests, and 26 more tales use forest themes or images – so nearly 70% have a forest connection.[2] And the forest itself is often seen as emblematic of fairy tales and folklore. When Taylor Swift brought out her 2020 album *Folklore*, for instance, her cover art simply depicted a girl in a forest bearing a remarkable resemblance to the one depicted by Arthur Rackham in his 1909 illustration of Red Riding Hood.

The key attribute of these forests is usually their lack of other people; there may well be other beings lurking among the trees, but the person venturing into the forest is usually uneasily aware of their solitude. This is perhaps encapsulated in Angela Carter's Red Riding Hood retelling 'The Company of Wolves', which warns readers that 'You are always in danger in the forest, where no people are.' In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, this aspect of the forest is very much emphasised. Without viewing Gawain too much through a Red Riding Hood lens, there are certainly a number of parallels in his story, even down to the colour red with which he is associated as he sets out on his journey:

> 'Ryally with red golde vpon rede gowlez...
> Now grayþed is Gawain gay
> [...]
> In þe wyldrenesse of Wyrale [...]
> Sumwhyle with wormez he werrez, and wolues als,
> Sumwhyle with wodwos, þat woned in þe knarrez'
>
> ['royally in gold, on a ruby-red background...
> Now Gawain is dressed and ready
> [...]
> In the wilds of the Wirral [...]
> Here he scraps with serpents and snarling wolves,

[1] Fitt II, ll. 740-45. All translations from Simon Armitage, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Faber & Faber, 2007) unless otherwise stated.
[2] Sara Maitland, *Gossip from the Forest: The tangled roots of our forests and fairytales* (Granta, 2012).

here he tangles with wodwos causing trouble in the crags']

This idea of the forest being a wild space filled with all manner of threatening creatures taps into much wider long-standing oppositions between the forest and so-called 'civilisation', which are found all around the world. Speaking of the role of the forest in Western traditions, Robert Pogue Harrison suggests that 'A sylvan fringe of darkness defined the limits of Western civilization's cultivation, the margins of its cities, the boundaries of its institutional domain; but also the extravagance of its imagination.'[4] However, at least in England, real-life woodlands have long been somewhat less extravagant. Describing the situation in the early Middle Ages, the woodland historian Oliver Rackham notes that "The great survey of 1086 [the Domesday Book] makes it perfectly clear that England was not very wooded. Out of 12,580 settlements for which adequate particulars are given, only 6208 possessed woodland. [...] It is unlikely any wildwood still remained'.[5] A map in Rackham's book indicates the unwooded nature of England in 1086 – essentially, by the time Gawain was written, you couldn't travel for more than a couple of miles through woodland without popping out the other side, so it was relatively difficult to get lost in an English wood or forest.

But despite this, myths about the 'wild wood' have proved pervasive to this day. In her engaging 2012 study of the connections between forests and fairy tales, Sara Maitland has argued that part of the role that forests play in the collective imagination is from the stories we absorbed at an impressionably early age:

> "Woods are part of our fantasy of childhood because of the fairy stories. […] We act as though the forests of fairy story, of the imagination, are entirely real, and anyone who challenges our slightly sentimental account of the woods is behaving like a wicked witch, out to destroy small children."[6]

More recently, Elizabeth Parker's 2020 study *The Forest and the EcoGothic* has connected these shared imaginings with darker areas of the psyche, observing that 'The Deep Dark Woods do not threaten our demise, yet we project into them endless images and sensations of terror.'[7]

From a psychoanalytic perspective, forests very often symbolise the unconscious. Bruno Bettelheim, best known for his influential 1976 exploration of fairy tales and child development, *The Uses of Enchantment*, has suggested that the forest 'symbolizes the place in which inner darkness is confronted and worked through; where uncertainty is resolved about who one is; and where one begins to understand who one wants to be.

[3] Fitt II, ll, 663, 665, 701, 720-1, trans. Armitage (slightly adapted).
[4] Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (University of Chicago Press, 1992).
[5] Oliver Rackham, *Trees & Woodland in the British Landscape* (1976, rev. 1990; Phoenix Press, 2001), pp. 48, 55.
[6] Maitland, *Gossip from the Forest*, pp. 21, 27.
[7] Elizabeth Parker, *The Forest and the EcoGothic: The Deep Dark Woods in the Popular Imagination* (Palgrave, 2020), p. 23.

Since ancient times the near impenetrable forest in which we get lost has symbolized the dark, hidden, near-impenetrable world of our unconscious'.[8] Travelling further back in psychoanalytic history, Freud discusses forests in his landmark 1919 essay 'The Uncanny', arguing that our perception of the uncanny as 'that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well-known and had long been familiar' is often experienced in forests: "when one is lost in a forest in high altitudes', he suggests, 'every endeavour to find the marked or familiar path ends again and again in a return to one and the same spot'.[9]

These twentieth-century psychoanalytic framings very much tally with forest associations more specific to the Middle Ages, where they are frequently associated with mental illness and madness. The words 'wōde' and 'wōde' meaning both wood and madness are convenient homonyms in Middle English, but we find these connections in literature from across medieval Europe. One of the most famous examples is in Chétien de Troyes' Arthurian romance *Yvain*, where the eponymous knight loses his sanity in the forest – and even if outright madness doesn't form part of the story, there are many other occasions in which the woods are the space in which to lose other aspects of the self, as well as one's clothing. For instance, in the Breton lai *Bisclavret* and its numerous lycanthropic variants, the protagonist reveals that 'jeo devienc bisclavret. / En cele grant forest me met, / Al plus espés de la gaudine, / S'i vif de preie e de ravine [...] / jeo vois tut nu' ['I become a werewolf: I enter the vast forest and live in the deepest part of the wood where I feed off the prey I can capture. [...] I go about completely naked.'].

Both in the Middle Ages and in more recent times, the forest is somewhere we both know and don't know; somewhere that can feel incredibly familiar, but which can change in the blink of an eye to feeling very alien. In the 1999 found footage horror film *The Blair Witch Project*, for example, most of the horror comes from just imagining what might be found in the woods, once the characters become truly lost. The moment in the film when the three student filmmakers – who had set out so optimistically just a short while before – start to panic is the moment where they lose their map. In her 1985 essay 'Overture and incidental music for A Midsummer Night's Dream', Angela Carter draws a distinction between the 'enchanted wood' and the 'haunted forest' – one is magical, the other is terrifying.[10] The forest is thus a metamorphic space, capable of being one, or the other, or both, at any one time.

As we saw with Taylor Swift's *Folklore*, the forest is widely used in popular culture as a symbolic stand-in for fairy tales as a whole. To take another example which uses very similar iconography, the opening sequence of the 2010s ABC television series *Once Upon a Time*, in which all the main characters are figures from well-known fairy tales, shows figures moving through a wooded landscape of tall, straight trees against

[8] Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (Penguin, 1976).
[9] Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny' (1919), trans. James Strachey.
[10] Angela Carter, 'Overture and Incidental Music for A Midsummer Night's Dream (1985).

a gloomy purple-blue sky suggesting twilight. But with just a few small tweaks, this could equally become the essence of horror – in the 2009 horror film *The Human Centipede*, for instance, there's a scene where the characters run through a shadowy twilight wood which looks remarkably similar to its fairy-tale counterpart in *Once Upon a Time*.

Fairy tales and horror are very often two sides of the same coin; both deal with dreams, hopes and fears on a very primal level, and contain a good deal of overlapping material. As film director Julia Ducournau has commented in an interview promoting her 2016 tale-like horror *Raw*, 'You're always looking for the truth and I found a form of truth, first in fairy tales and then in horror movies.' Meanwhile medievalist and film scholar Carol Clover, in her influential study on gender and horror *Men, Women and Chain Saws*, has commented that '…horror movies look like nothing so much as folktales – a set of fixed tale types that generate an endless stream of what are in effect variants: sequels, remakes and rip-offs'.[11]

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight falls into both fairy tale and horror territory, and indeed can stake a convincing claim to being the original folk horror. Kier-La Janisse's 2021 documentary charting the history of folk horror in film, *Woodlands Dark and Days Bewitched*, suggests that it is 'based upon the juxtaposition of the prosaic and the uncanny', which is very much in evidence throughout the poem – and David Lowery's the 2021 film adaptation *The Green Knight* very much leans into this in places.[12] There are more than a few Gawain parallels in Ben Wheatley's 2021 film *In the Earth*, not least meeting terrifying bearded men with axes in the middle of the woods.[13]

Many fairy tales play on the way the forest can switch in the blink of an eye from enchanted to haunted and back again, and this has frequently been represented visually in illustrations and film. Snow White's flight through the haunted/enchanted forest in Disney's 1937 animation *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* is a childhood touchstone for many, not least because of its discomforting suggestion that, however benign they may seem, the woods *can always change back*. It is illuminating to look at Snow White alongside Dario Argento's 1977 horror masterpiece *Suspiria*; during the making of the film, Argento sent cinematographer Luciano Tovoli to watch Disney's *Snow White* to draw on its colour palette and visual vocabulary, and *Suspiria* contains some strikingly similar sequences. In particular, a scene in the film's opening minutes reveals a girl running through the forest wearing clothing which is a direct visual echo of Disney's animated counterpart.[14]

Returning to medieval literature – and keeping Carter's distinction between 'haunted' and 'enchanted' in mind – we can see woods and forests portrayed as alternately one or the other at different times, frequently

[11] Carol Clover, *Men, Women and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (1992).
[12] *The Green Knight*, dir. David Lowery (2021).
[13] *In the Earth*, dir. Ben Wheatley (2021).
[14] *Suspiria*, dir. Dario Argento (1977).

reflecting and amplifying the psyche of the texts' protagonists. On the enchanted side of things we have the *locus amoenus* of the orderly woodland or garden, perhaps most famously portrayed in the *Romance of the Rose*, where the narrator begins his tale by stepping into a springtime tree-filled landscape before entering the garden itself; on the haunted side, we have the desolate wilderness, or *locus horribilis*, as experienced by the speaker in the Middle English lyric 'I must go walke the wood so wild'. And while Gawain himself is not always in a position to appreciate the magical side of the natural world, the Gawain poet demonstrates that woods can contain as many enchantments as dangers, at least in warmer weather, as can be seen in the poet's evocative descriptions of the turning seasons in Fitt 2:

> 'Boþe groundez and þe greuez grene ar her wedez [...]
> And blossumez bolne to blowe
> Bi rawez rych and ronk
> Þen notez noble innoȝe
> Ar herde in wod so wlonk'
>
> [...woods and ground wear a wardrobe of green [...]
> Now every hedgerow brims
> with blossom and with bud
> and lively songbirds sing
> from lovely, leafy woods.][15]

Again and again, in folklore and literature we find this ambivalence: forests are a space where the usual rules of society don't apply, which makes them more dangerous, but also more exciting. Taking another couple of English cultural monuments, this sentiment is a major theme in all of Shakespeare's wood-set plays – *As You Like It*'s Celia, for instance, describing the Forest of Arden as a place of liberty rather than banishment – and in tales of folk heroes such as Robin Hood.[16] Looking to the wider European fairy tale tradition, we can also see this idea explored in stories such as Catherine-Anne d'Aulnoy's 1698 tale *The Wild Boar*, where a prince cursed to live as a boar declares that, rather than leading a life of uncomfortable luxury within the hypocritical court, 'I shall go to the deepest paths of the forest and lead the life which befits a wild boar of might and spirit.'[17] And while Gawain himself is frequently too busy battling wodwos and avoiding

[15] Fitt II, ll. 508, 512-15.
[16] William Shakespeare, *As You Like It,* Act I, scene 3.
[17] Catherine-Anne d'Aulnoy, *The Wild Boar* (1698), trans. Jack Zipes, *The Great Fairy Tale Tradition* (Norton, 2001).

axes to fully appreciate its more exciting aspects, the forest certainly offers possibilities that staying at King Arthur's court would not have afforded him.

Above all, the forest is a space for initiation in fairy tales. Protagonists venture into the forest to undergo some sort of test – and this is clearly the case with Gawain. We see this both within fairy tales themselves and in wider folkloric traditions; to take a more modern example, in Forest of Dean slang, to have your first amorous experience in the forest is to get your 'fern ticket'.[18] And appropriately enough, the climactic scene of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* takes place in the Green Chapel, which is described as being accessed via a 'scha3e', a small wood, thicket or grove. While the the servant from the castle warns Gawain that 'For alle þe golde vpon grounde I nolde go with þe, / Ne bare þe fela3schip þur3 þis fryth on fote fyrre [For all the wealth in the world I wouldn't walk with you / or go further in this forest by a single footstep]', Gawain is not deterred:

> 'Thenne gyrdez he to Gryngolet, and gederez þe rake,
> Schowuez in bi a schore at a scha3e syde,
> Ridez þur3 þe ro3e bonk ry3t to þe dale;
> And þenne he wayted hym aboute, and wylde hit hym þo3t,
> And se3e no sygne of resette bisydez nowhere'
>
> Then [Gawain] presses ahead, picks up a path,
> enters a steep-sided grove on his steed
> then goes by and by to the bottom of a gorge
> where he wonders and watches – it looks a wild place:
> no sign of a settlement anywhere to be seen.'[19]

While Gawain's travels in the forest have remained relatively isolated up until this point, his arrival at the Green Chapel marks the point where another forest being makes his axe-wielding presence felt. Likewise, while Carter may warn us that the fairy tale forest contains no *people*, this doesn't rule out the presence of less benign, monstrous or semi-human characters. Figures living outside the boundaries of usual human conventions – whether witches, wolves or other types of outlaws – are closely associated with the

[18] See, for instance, Zakiya McKenzie's 2019 poem "Fern Ticket', written while she was Forestry England's Writer in Residence: 'In rhythm with rain, in motion with moon / To give and take, to enjoy the bloom / To dance for days and to love with it / Come with amour, here lies the fern ticket'.
[19] ll. 2150-1, 2160-4.

forest, as we see, for instance in the Grimms' Bluebeard tale *The Robber Bridegroom*, where the titular bridegroom gives us the first clue to his monstrousness by telling his future bride that 'My house is out in the dark forest'.[20]Again, we see the uncanny nature of the forest at work; when we meet seemingly safe-looking people, or houses, in the middle of the woods, it's vital to be on our guard. The house in the middle of the forest could easily turn out to be *unheimlich* rather than *heimlich*, a tempting-looking gingerbread house lived in by a wicked witch. Castle Hautdesert, which Gawain sees glimmering out of the gloom, is equally tempting and delicious-looking, and equally unreal, as suggested by the poet's descriptions evoking the paper castles used to adorn dishes served at banquets:

'...he watz war in þe wod of a won in a mote [...]
Chalkwhyt chymnees þer ches he inno3e
Vpon bastel rouez, þat blenked ful quyte;
So mony pynakle payntet watz poudred ayquere,
Among þe castel carnelez clambred so þik,
Þat pared out of papure purely hit semed.'

[...he became aware, in these woods, of high walls [...]
Uncountable chimneys the colour of chalk
sprutted from the roof and sparkled in the sun.
So perfect was that vision of painted pinnacles
clustered within the castle's enclosure
it appeared that the place was cut from paper.'][21]

And the forest is ultimately the place where Gawain must reckon with his own potential monstrousness or shadow side, whether the potential dark double offered by the Green Knight and/or Bertilak, or the less perfect side of his own nature when he accepts the green girdle. If the forest has no people in it, there's also the question of whether you yourself might become less human by entering into its tangled spaces. This is shown to unsettling effect in the 2018 science fiction film *Annihilation*, where a group of scientists explore a mysterious area known as the 'shimmer', a place deep in the woods with strange lighting effects and even stranger effects on anyone who goes in; humans become more like plants and vice

[20] 'The Robber Bridegroom', Grimm (1857 edn), trans. Jack Zipes.
[21] Fitt II, ll, 764, 798-802.

versa. By venturing into the woods and accepting the girdle, then, does Gawain become similarly intertwined with the forest?

So how should Gawain, or the protagonist of any fairy tale, survive the woods? The rules in fairy tales are sometimes quite confusing, as anyone attempting to glean advice from these stories will soon discover. For instance, 'be polite and helpful to people you meet' might sound like a fairly sensible rule (e.g. in the Grimms *Three Little Men in the Woods*), but sometimes the person you're being polite to might turn out to be an evil magician who carries you away in his basket, as happens in the Grimms' *Fitcher's Bird*. Similarly, 'don't get into strange beds' seems like a good rule of thumb (cf. *Little Red Riding Hood*), but sometimes this is entirely the right thing to do (cf. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*). So there's no clear-cut way for a fairy tale protagonist to behave; it's essentially something which needs to be assessed on a case-by-case basis – and again, this is something that Gawain has to work out for himself as he continues his travels. Even *Little Red Riding Hood*'s cardinal rule, 'don't stray from the path', is sometimes the right course of action – if you don't stray from the path and break the rules, you don't learn anything.

The forest ultimately becomes a teacher and nourishing mother: you can learn from it, it can feed you, and it can send you out into the world reborn. To take another Angela Carter example, her short story 'Penetrating to the Heart of the Forest' follows two children in a wood whose trees are 'knobbed with white, red-tipped whorls that looked so much like breasts they put their mouths to the nipples and sucked a sweet, refreshing milk.'[22] Sometimes this rebirth is made quite literal, as can be seen, for instance, in the very vulva-like tree in Tim Burton's 1999 film *Sleepy Hollow*, another story about a confident young man going into the woods and coming out changed after meeting a man with a fearsome weapon.[23]

So, if the forest is a place for wildness, shadow sides, and doubles, do you ever truly leave these behind when you return back to the human world? Literature suggests otherwise; in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for instance, the parts of the fairy king and queen, Oberon and Titania, are often played by the same actors who play Theseus and Hippolyta, the King and Queen of Athens, suggesting that their fairy counterparts might be their own more darkly magical sides. And when Gawain finally rides back to King Arthur's court, he returns wearing the green girdle like a snaky forest tendril:

> "'Lo! lorde,' quoþ þe leude, and þe lace hondeled, [...]
> Þis is þe token of vntrawþe þat I am tan inne,
> And I mot nedez hit were wyle I may last;
> [...] alle þe court als

[22] Angela Carter, 'Penetrating to the Heart of the Forest', *Fireworks* (1974).
[23] *Sleepy Hollow*, dir. Tim Burton (1999).

La3en loude þerat, and luflyly acorden
Þat lords and ladis þat longed to þe Table,
Vche burne of þe broþerhede, a bauderyk schulde haue,
A bende abelef hym aboute of a bry3t grene [...]
And he honoured þat hit hade euermore after'

['"Regard," said Gawain, grabbing the girdle [...]
I was tainted by untruth and this, its token,
I will drape across my chest till the day I die.
[...] the company of the court
allowed that each lord belonging to their Order –
every knight in the brotherhood – should wear such a belt,
a bright green belt worn obliquely to the body [...]
and each knight who held it was honoured for ever.'][24]

Gawain interprets this as a mark of shame, whereas the other knights interpret it as a badge of honour. This can most straightforwardly be interpreted as the knights simply failing to understand Gawain's quest, but it's also a final suggestion that strange green things emerging from the woods may ultimately be ambiguous, and that you never entirely leave the forest behind.

In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the forest is a vital space for Gawain to grow, be challenged and changed. In folktales and fairy tales, you usually come out again, but reborn, altered and seasoned. But perhaps, the stories suggest, we also carry the forest with us when we emerge.

[24] Fitt IV, ll. 2505, 2509-10, 2513-16, 2520.