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Incisions, gaps and insertions in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Lowery's *The Green Knight*: "slotted through a slit so the hide stayed whole"

Introduction

There are many instances of contradictory statements asserted authoritatively by the poetic voice of the *Gawain*-poet. Among those, the initial description of the giant axe held by the Green Knight appears simultaneously awe-inspiring and bathetic, both hyperbolic and banal:

> And an ax in his other, a hoge and unmete,
> A spetos sparthe to expoun in spelle, quo-so myght
> The hede of an elnyerde the large lenkthe hade,
> The grayn al of grene stele and of golde hewen,
> The bit burnyst bryght, with a brod egge
> As wel schapen to schere as scharp rasores.
>
> and in the other hand held the mother of all axes,
> a cruel piece of kit I kid you not:
> the head was an ell in length at least
> and forged in green steel with a gilt finish;
> its broad-edged blade brightly burnished,
> it could shear a man's scalp and shave him to boot. (l.208-13)

The illustrious weapon's function is compared to that of a simple razor, despite its monstrosity and huge size ('a hoge and unmete'): what kind of head would be shaved by such a razor? Is this reference to what is either a tool, or a surgical implement, rather than to an actual weapon, to be understood as an ironic understatement? And why would the knight carry such a thing if he did not intend to cut something with it? Indeed, most of the poem and of Lowery's adaptation is concerned with whether or not the axe will be used to cut Gawain's head off. Not only is this precise issue of the beheading the focal point of the whole journey, but it also reverberates through both works in a structural and covert manner.

Images of cuts, incisions, gashes, carvings, fracture, gouging, paring and chopping pervade the story in both poem and film, providing the audience with anticipatory alternative versions of the much-expected event of the beheading of Gawain. In the movie, such images appear in the 'Christmas Game' sequence at 00:22:46 (the beheading of the Green Knight by Gawain, with a close-up on the open wound), at the end of 'The Journey Out' at 00:41:33 (the soldier's corpse pierced with arrows and bearing head injuries), in 'A Kindness' at 00:48:42 (the broken shield presenting an upside-down image of a beheaded Mary), and in 'The Voyage Home' at 01:58:49 (Gawain's son wounded in battle). The circulation of the motif of the incision through the poem creates a network of images which build up a complex visual and narrative structure. The poet's

power of visual evocation which applies to the refined and distinguished ornaments and jewels of the court is also harnessed in the crude and bloody descriptions of wounds.

Before moving on to the analysis of the poem and the film, a few elements of context should be presented. The tradition of the ludic beheading or game of decapitation in mediaeval literature: Philippe Walter reminds us of the long tradition of such myths of beheadings, in which the beheaded character retrieves his head from the ground. This is found in hagiographic legends (Saint Denis) and Arthurian texts: *La Mule sans frein* / *Demoiselle à la mule* and *Hunbaut* are two romances in which Gawain partakes in this type of ludic decapitation. It appears also in the Vedic mythology in which Indra decapitates a giant (Namuci), whose rolling head then becomes the sun.

The tradition of medical and anatomical representations of wounds on the body of a Wound Man: the image of the Wound Man, a graphic drawing of a violently wounded figure repeated across a series of European surgical treatises from 1400 onwards.

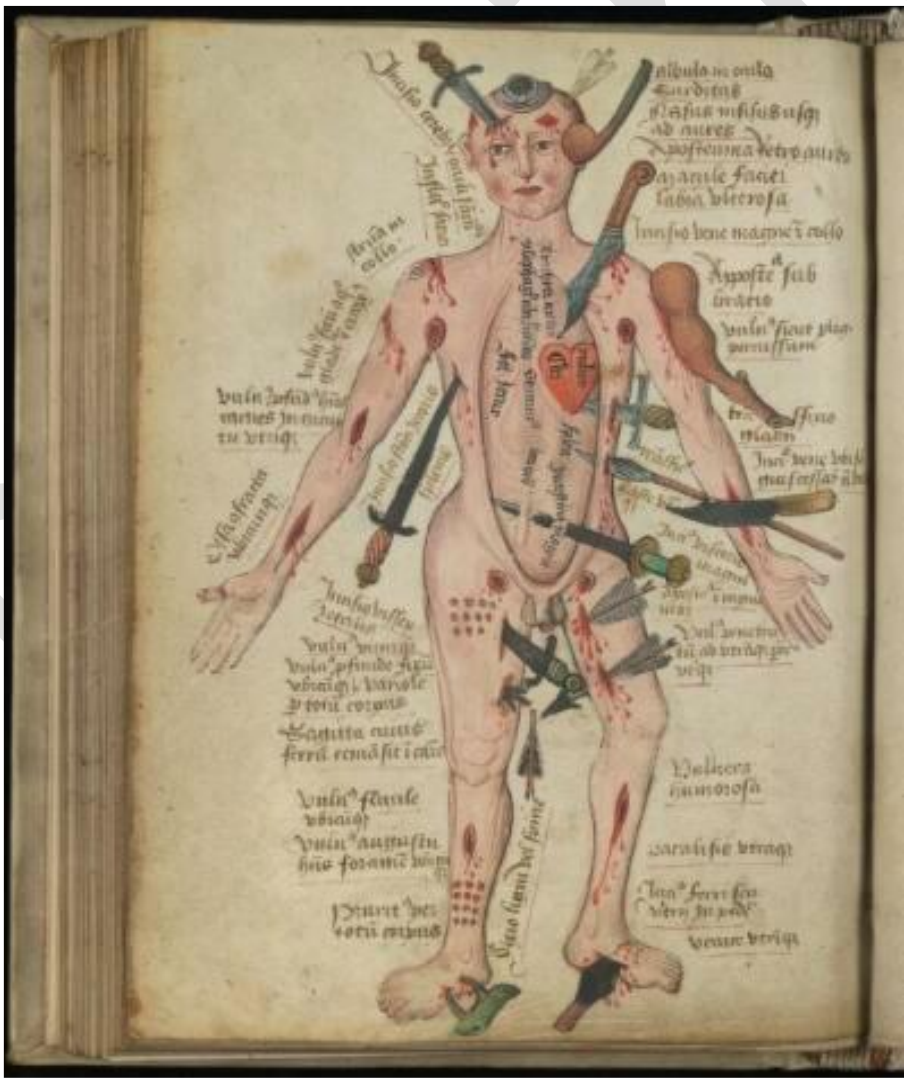

Figure 1 MS 290, folio 53v, depicting the Wound Man, after 1491, England, paint and ink on parchment, 18 x 13.5 cm. Wellcome Library, London. Digital image: Hartnell.

As explained by Hartnell, the image was not intended to cause fear but to convey medical knowledge on the healing of wounds. However, in the English version of the image, found in a fifteenth-century medical treatise, the figuration of this hypothetical wounded man with his eyes calmly open despite his multiple wounds is very striking. His stoic response to so many cuts rivals the Green Knight's endurance of his own wound, as he is beheaded 'yet the man doesn't shudder or stagger or sink' (430). It also echoes his subsequent self-narrative of courage and self-possession, positing himself as a model for Gawain: 'Did I budge or even blink when you aimed the axe, / or carp or quibble in King Arthur's castle, / or flap when my head went flying to my feet?' (2274-76).

The medieval theory of the continuous body: In medieval thought the body is an integral continuous whole, meaning that its parts share a common boundary (here, the skin, in the context of this study of incision), as opposed to contiguous and discrete wholes, like a group of people or a forest, which include parts that are either close to one another, or relatively scattered[1] and do not necessitate a common boundary. These notions originate in the logical concepts of mereology, that is to say the study of parts and of their relationship to the whole that they make up. The main object of the game in the poem is the bartering of an ideal continuous body, that of the perfect knight. The game challenges the intact corporeality of the unscathed warrior, as expressed on line 145: 'And alle his fetures folwande in forme that he hade, / ful clene.' Armitage translates this as 'In fact in all features he was finely formed / it seemed', also retaining the crucial notion of form, but as a verb.

This paper explores the materiality and the graphic quality of the motif of the wound effected by the axe or by other blades, but also the paradoxical outcomes of such incisions. Taken literally as well as metaphorically, the gesture of incising offers three main possible outcomes. Cuts can wound and kill: the expected destructive power of the cut is however undermined and questioned by the supernatural ability of the Green Knight to survive the beheading. In some instances cuts and incisions are paradoxically restorative of the integrity of the entities which are cut open. Incisions also may provide room for something else, specifically for insertions: they do not merely form gaping openings, they also facilitate the creation of new entities, that are composite and that integrate essential insertions.

Through anatomical cuts, violent incisions, artful carving of the killed deer and powerful beheading, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* deploys the possibilities of this motif, through a series of encounters that, to use the words of Richard H. Godden, 'reveal that this seemingly intact body is really a body-in-the-making, or maybe even a body-in-the-unmaking, one that is always at risk of disintegration, dismemberment, and re-configuration.' (Godden 1274)

I. The forms of the incision

[1] Contiguous wholes consist of parts that are discrete, but spatially close together, for instance, the trees making up a forest. Discrete wholes consist of parts that may be scattered, for instance, the individual knights composing the Round Table.

1. Violent and destructive incisions

Although violent flesh incisions take many forms, from clean decapitation and the carving up of a deer, to the small wound on Gawain's neck, there is a similarity in the form of the incision. Violence and crude bodily details are heightened, not only in the actual scenes of bloodshed but also in the hypothetical or remembered scenes.

When Bertilak's guide tries to warn Gawain and tempt him away from the Green Chapel, Armitage makes the guide use vivid imagery of a multiplicity of wounds (blows, punches, trampling) that can be inflicted by the Green Knight: 'bludgeoning' (2099), 'for he deals death blows by dint of his hands' (2105). This evokes the imagery of the Wound Man as the Green Knight's victims appear to suffer from a multiplicity of wounds. This expresses the hypothetical nature of the passage, as well as the guide's intention to exaggerate the risk so as to convince Gawain.

Endangering the integrity of the body means not only risking one's life but also endangering the unity of perception and subjectivity. The image of man's body, says Lacan in his Seminar, is the principle of every unity he perceives in objects. Why does the Green Knight not die when he is beheaded? Probably because he is of a different nature: Gawain's body is continuous, whereas the Green Knight is immediately perceived as Other. As 'half etayn' ('half-giant', 140), he is immune to the beheading. His nature is not human in the sense that his body may not be viewed as a continuous whole but rather as a substance, probably wood, that does not need to keep its whole enveloped in a boundary of skin to remain himself or itself. The axe itself may well be part of his body, since it is green and gold like him. His corporeality is that of a discrete whole.

The creaking sounds heard in the film when the Green Knight moves also suggest he is fully wooden. Therefore, the blood that spurts from his wound comes as a surprise, whereas his survival seems only natural: he has merely been pruned, not beheaded.

2. Anatomical incision

The first beheading is performed in almost surgical manner: 'the cleanness of the strike cleaved the spinal cord / and parted the fat and the flesh so far / that the bright steel blade took a bite from the floor' (424-6). The images of sharpness and the cross-section view of the open wound give an anatomically precise version of the cut. This is echoed later with the breaking up of the slain animals. The brutal opening up of the carcasses is followed by the ordered and precise dissection of internal parts.

With immense attention paid to detail, and the imitative alliteration evoking the sounds of cleaving and chopping, the poet insists on the craftsmanship and propriety of the cutting up: 'as the dede askes' (1327) literally means 'as it should be done', while Armitage insists on skill and art on the next line with 'those skilled in the art' (1328). These gestures aim at cleaning, separating the parts, neatly prizing them apart. The beauty of the *Gawain*-poet's rendition of

such precise and almost ritualized gestures strikes the reader / auditor with an impression of contrast between the object and its treatment.

3. Opening up: healing confessions

In the confession scene at Bertilak's castle, the priest hears *of* Gawain's sins and grants him absolution, but the reader never actually knows *what* Gawain confesses to. Without any direct speech in this passage, the truth of his confession can be questioned. The transformation that comes around in the character after his confession does not seem particularly profound: Gawain merely shakes off his sense of guilt and partakes in the festivities. This scene serves mainly as a means to prepare us for the second confession scene, during which Gawain authentically confesses his fear of death and his lie at the Green Chapel, and is genuinely heard by the Green Knight.

Here, the poet compares the beheading game to confession because both operate an illuminating opening: the materiality of the gesture is contrasted with the spiritual dimension of confession, which leads to the truthful expression of one's inner thoughts, the coming to light of what was secret and hidden. The beheading game is an ordeal leading the characters towards a healing process of truth-saying. The motif of the opening can here be understood metaphorically. The parallel is also visible in Lowery's depiction of the scene at 01:47:35 in 'A Beheading at the Green Chapel', with Gawain's kneeling posture.

> Thou art confessed so clene, beknowen of thy mysses,
> And has the penaunce apert, of the poynt of myn egge.
> I halde the polysed of that plight and pured as clene
> that I hold thee as pure as if thou hadst never been guilty.
>
> By confessing your failings you are free from fault
> and have openly paid penance at the point of my axe.
> I declare you purged, as polished and as pure
> as the day you were born, without blemish or blame. (l.2391-94)

In these lines, Gawain is objectified: like a vessel, he is opened, like a body, purged, like a stone he is polished – or like a pearl, since the comparison to pea or pearl appeared a few lines before, on line 2364. The staging of the beheading, like confession, is performative; through the ritualized encounter between the penitent, kneeling figure and the inhabitant of the chapel, Gawain lets his true and treacherous self appear. This type of opening incision is healing, as can be seen when it then leads to Gawain's symbolical rebirth.

II. Narrative and material gaps and insertions

1. Narrative gaps and the textile imagery

Despite the ambiguous play on the gaps between realism, symbolism and the realm of romance which leads to numerous conflicts intrinsic to the diegesis, the reader's first impression of clarity when discovering the story is undeniable. It is especially produced by the authoritative voice of the poet and by the apparent linearity of the narrative that is enhanced by the device of stanza linking, as explained in detail by Howell Chickering and Erik Weiskott. The repeated insistence on the value of truth also leads us to believe in the authority of the storytelling.

However, the narrative leaves many gaps for us to fill in. Among those, the narrative includes explicit ellipses and accelerations, like the ellipsis of the summer months, or that of the journey back. As Erik Weiskott remarks, Morgan's own expression of her intentions is left out despite her portrayal as the creator of the whole plot; the definitive interpretation of the green girdle remains mysterious; and an important implied consequence of Gawain's compact with Bertilak remains covert – namely the part that would entail sexual intercourse between the two men, should Gawain have to exchange winnings after yielding to the lady's advances.

What is interesting here is that those narrative cuts are not experienced by the reader as gaps *per se*. This is because they are skilfully filled in and replaced by another section of the poem. In the movie, they are formally highlighted by the visual construction of the sections and the use of intertitles that create a sense of separation between episodes.

In the poem, the imagery of textile craftsmanship is included in many passages, for instance in the description of the embroidered clothes of the Green Knight, with images like 'tailored to his torso', 'cloth fully lined / with smoothly shorn fur', 'stripy silk', 'stitched onto silk', 'embroidered as it was with butterflies and birds' (152-166) and 'gowned in green growth' (185). The soft materials worn by the Green Knight contrast with the metallic armour of Gawain. The Green Knight wears woven materials, fur, vegetation and embroidered cloth, his refined dress corresponds to what some medieval elegant courtiers would wear at court on a festive occasion. Embroidery, weaving and narrative all include the aesthetic pleasures of ornamentation and detailing, leading to a transformation of the linearity of threads into a complex structure, and to the stitching up of the gaps which are adorned in such a way that we do not recognize them as gaps anymore.

In the film sequence 'A Too Quick Year', the process of creating the green girdle is interestingly presented in a scene that indicates simultaneity by using alternating shots from the conventional Christian preparations for Gawain's journey and shots from Morgan's magical creation of the green girdle. Particularly, between 00:33:05 and 00:35:09, we can see her carve and insert the magic token or charm, and sew it up so that it is fully enclosed in the material. The incision is here merely the first step before the insertion of the charm.

Fitt 3 is also structured following the system of weaving or knitting: with the insertion of the scenes in the castle between the two sections of the hunting process, a structure is created and iterated. The hunt always precedes the bedroom scene, which is then followed by the prising apart of the game, and the sequence is ended with the exchange of winnings and its

celebration. This quaternary structure is repeated three times, like so many rows of knitting or weaving.

The process of healing is also conveyed through textile patterns: the gaps in the narrative can be created by the suppression and stitching up of traumatic events. For instance, the suppression of the actual beheading of Gawain, which never occurs in the poem, is replaced by the insertion of alternative passages: the insertions may seem superficial at first glance, like the speech of the guide representing Gawain's murder as certain and nonsensical: 'just as sure as you sit in your saddle, / if you go there you'll be killed, of that there's no question' (2110-11). Its role is to both suppress and replace the missing section of the story. Like scar tissue, the embroidered gap paradoxically both protrudes and fits in.

David Lowery embraces this with his alternative endings; the film envisages hypothetic ways to fill the gaps in the story with maze-like alternatives to the main plot, and his cinematography adapts the poem's playfulness with discontinuity, with the insertion of titles and the cuts to black, acknowledging the craft of the storyteller.

"The nick to his neck was healed by now" (2484): the wound on Gawain's neck becomes a scar before he reaches Camelot, which is another figuration of healing. Gawain's corporeality has changed even though he has not been fully cut: rather, he has been slit and carved by the Green Knight, ultimately moulded and transformed into a full-blown knight who can embrace fear and perform the unflinching stoic behaviour that is expected of him.

2. Architectural openings of stone and paper

The mineral environment of the two castles comes in opposition to the uncanny mix of architecture and vegetation at the Green Chapel, and the castles of Arthur and Bertilak share many structural similarities. However, in the poem, Camelot is barely described, while the architectural and interior descriptions of Hautdesert are highly precise and technical.

Architectural openings are used by Lowery to create a sense of the diverging identities of the two castles. Hautdesert is mainly light, with its large windows (01:16:40) through which Gawain can look and see the surrounding forest (01:59:02) in 'An exchange of Winnings'. On the contrary, in 'The Christmas Game' Camelot is dark, barely lit through small apertures like oculi, loopholes and arrow slits. This creates a closed space in Camelot, a castle where doors and windows create undesirable breaches in the fortress, as seen when the Green Knight enters the main hall on his horse in defiance of Arthur's power, or at 02:01:12 in 'The Voyage Home' when Gawain's hall is under attack and the soldiers try and enforce closure of the gate against the rioters who push to open it up.

In Hautdesert, the palisade, the drawbridge and the fortifications delineate a protective boundary around the castle, drawing an apparently clear-cut line between the rough, inhospitable outside and the comfortable, warm and refined enclosure. However, the limit

between the interior and the exterior of the palisade is highly ambiguous, as Colette Stévanovitch has shown:

> […] le château de Bertilak est construit au milieu de cette forêt peu hospitalière. Il ne se distingue pas fondamentalement d'elle, il en constitue au contraire le prolongement. La palissade qui le sépare de la nature environnante enclot des arbres dans l'espace qu'elle délimite, et la séparation entre les arbres de l'intérieur et ceux de l'extérieur semble des plus artificielles […] Ce bâtiment à demi enfoui au milieu d'un enchevêtrement de végétation n'est pas sans rappeler le [Chevalier Vert] lui-même, à demi recouvert d'une masse de cheveux, favoris et barbe verts se continuant par la crinière verte de son cheval. (Stévanovitch 5-6)

Not only is the castle immersed in its environment, but its very structure is similar to that of the forest, with the many pikes and turrets figuring the verticality of trees and the ditches evoking the intricate terrain and waterways described a few stanzas before. It is furthermore shown to be a space that is not as closed, solid and mineral as a fortress should be, when it is described as a work of paper art:

> So mony pynakle payntet was poudred ayquere
> Among the castel carneles, clambred so thik,
> That pared out of papure purely hit seemed.
>
> So perfect was that vision of painted pinnacles
> clustered within the castle's enclosure
> it appeared that the place was cut from paper. (800-802)

This vision of the castle associating the building with painting and paper strikingly contrasts with the previous qualification of the place as a 'stronghold' (771). This reference reminds us of the connotation of paper as rare and costly material, used for the decoration of refined meals, apt for Hautdesert. It also is a material that can be cut through and intricately folded, and whose shape is made beautiful through openings. Although paper was made from rags in the medieval period, it also creates another connection for today's readers: as we imagine paper to be produced out of wood, this line points at the covert link between this castle and the substance of the Green Knight. It also creates a metafictional connection: the apparition of the castle in the diegesis, emerging in the heart of the forest (764) as if it were produced by Gawain's performative prayer, echoes its apparition in the poetic narrative. The manuscript may well be of vellum, but the castle is of paper, in the sense that it is a poetic creation[2].

Conclusion: 'slotted through a slit so the hide stayed whole'

The undoing of the hunted animals in Fitt 3 generate the most concretely explicit passages about incisions. The emblematic force of the image on line 1338, 'slotted through a slit so the hide stayed whole', showing how the animal hide is both skilfully incised and kept whole,

[2] I address my thanks to Florence Bourgne for her illuminating remarks about paper in this context.

pervades the whole poem. The fantasy of the intact body is here replaced with another, more ambiguous ideal of the wounded body and of the open space. Incising, that is to say opening the skin or boundary with restraint and care, gives access to the form both from the outside and the inside. It maintains the perfection of the form while simultaneously penetrating the inner core of the object.

In the end of the film (02:04:23) the cross-section of the trunk has been carved with the inscription '... the Green Knight': this double incision can be construed as a figuration of how cutting gives access to the true identity of the object and to its wholeness, but the noxiousness of such a cut differs from the enlightening opening of Gawain's nick in the neck. By opening him up with restraint, without beheading him fully, the Green Knight creates Gawain's new identity and reveals his true nature.

This pattern echoes the fascination of medieval artists for the motif of the wound of Christ, a mystical intermediary space that transgresses the boundaries between the material and the spiritual, the corporeal and the aesthetic, form and matter.

Figure 2 The Prayerbook of Bonne of Luxembourg, fol. 331r, depicting the Arma Christi and the Wound of Christ, before 1349, Paris, ink and paint on parchment, 13.2 x 9.7 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

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