Images

Fig. 1
From the manuscript.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gawain_and_the_Green_Knight.jpg#/media/File:Gawain_and_the_Green_Knight.jpg

Fig. 2
Clive Hicks-Jenkins illustration.
https://static.wixstatic.com/media/09abdd_4273ba9f9ec94be3baa25726aaf3275a~mv2.jpg/v1/fill/w_963,h_975,al_c,q_85,usm_0.66_1.00_0.01,enc_auto/300dpi%20version.jpg

Fig. 3
Cover of Tolkien trans. by John Howe.
https://historyandnature.files.wordpress.com/2014/06/gawain-and-green-knight.png?w=768

Fig. 4
John Howe full illustration.
https://gawainblog.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/howe2.jpg

Fig. 5
Cover of Tolkien trans. by unknown.
https://cdn11.bigcommerce.com/s-nfxi2m/images/stencil/1280x1280/products/752/1244/GawainGreenKnight__28688.1477599518.jpg?c=2

Fig. 6
Cover of O'Donoghue trans.
https://d3525k1ryd2155.cloudfront.net/f/539/424/9780140424539.RH.0.x.jpg

Fig. 7
Cover of Merwin trans.
https://www.bloodaxebooks.com/content/products/2015-07/l/55aa6f37d7a95.jpg

Fig. 8
From the graphic novel by Penman and Reppion.
https://www.brokenfrontier.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/sir-gawain-and-the-green-knight-penman-reppion-1.jpg

Fig. 9
From Adventure Time.
https://sites.nd.edu/manuscript-studies/files/2022/09/Fern-4-1024x849.jpg

Fig. 10
From *Sword of the Valiant.*

https://m.media-amazon.com/images/M/MV5BMGRlMWM5MzctZmZhZS00NmE5LTgwOGQtMzBkNjU5ZDUyYmM5XkEyXkFqcGdeQXVyMjUyNDk2ODc@._V1_.jpg

Fig. 11
From the 1991 TV adaptation.
https://i.ytimg.com/vi/fBEv8xjBJf8/hqdefault.jpg

Fig. 12
From The Green Knight movie.
https://b276103.smushcdn.com/276103/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/The-Green-Knight-2021-1660x761.jpg?lossy=1&strip=0&webp=1

Fig. 13
David Balade
https://static.broceliande.guide/IMG/jpg/pages-sire_gauvain_et_le_chevalier_vert.jpg
(If possible, crop so that the text on the right is removed.)

The Green Knight: An Ambiguous Portrait

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This paper is about the representation of the Green Knight, first in visual media, and then in what I'm calling the ambiguous portrait that emerges from the poem itself. I proceed as follows: first I will outline a small selection of images of the character, taken from illustrations, book covers and adaptations in various media. I will then introduce a basic concept of ambiguity to help us relate the notable variation in these images to features in the text. In turning to the text we will find three high-level, guiding ambiguities, which can help to explain some of the variation. To conclude, I will examine the ending and ask if it offers a disambiguation of these ambiguities. All the while the focus will be on the character who on a first reading we know as the Green Knight (i.e. the Bercilak side of the character will not be touched on much here).

Images of the Green Knight

Let's begin with an illustration from the manuscript, depicting the moment that the Green Knight lifts his severed head to speak to Gawain (fig. 1). The character is shown dressed in green, riding a green horse. Despite the supernatural event taking place, he appears to be human, with white skin, blonde hair and a blonde, cropped beard. It has sometimes been said that this is not a very attentive illustration, as the text describes the character's hair and beard as long and green, and perhaps suggests that his skin is green as well.[1] But it is

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[1] The greenness of the skin is contested. In the text it reads, "For wonder of his hwe men hade, / Set in his semblaunt sene" (147-8). Both *hwe* and *semblaunt* are ambiguous. The former can mean "complexion" and the second "face," which gives us two chances that the green skin of the character is encoded here (MED "heu n.", "sembluant n."). But they can also mean "colour" and "appearance" respectively, which justify less specific readings, such as the following from Andrew and Waldron's prose translation: "For people were amazed at his colour, ingrained in his outward appearance." That the character's complexion is at least an aspect

interesting to note that in the very first attested representations of the text, there is some confusion about how the Green Knight appears.

We leap next from the time of the manuscript to the present: an illustration by Clive Hicks-Jenkins, from a 2018 special edition of the Simon Armitage translation (fig. 2). Here we have a strange, collage-like representation of the character, whose part-fragmentation perhaps reflects the aforementioned confusion. The image is replete with natural imagery: leaves, tree trunks, birds and flowers, some of which resemble eyes. One key feature of this image, I think, is how beautiful the Green Knight's face is.

In figure 3 we see an illustration by John Howe, used as a cover image for the HarperCollins edition of the Tolkien translation. We see a giant figure with long beard and hair, who appears to be naked. The setting is the Green Chapel, which is presented as wild and mysterious. This can be seen more clearly if we look at the whole image (fig. 4), more dominated by the wintry but radiant landscape, which has something mystical about it.

In another cover image for the Tolkien translation (fig. 5), used for the Del Rey Books edition, we see a knight in full armour, who I assume is the Green Knight, judging by the age of the figure and the full beard, though it could conceivably be Gawain, considering that the Green Knight is not wearing armour in the text. (Or perhaps this is not a character at all but simply a representation of chivalry?) Regardless, the Green Knight is present in the doubling taking place. In the first instance we have an ordinary knight, in the second, a less distinct, more supernatural-seeming green figure.

In the cover image for the O'Donoghue translation for Penguin (fig. 6), we have a headless green figure. The artist has opted for a greater degree of abstraction, perhaps as a cunning way of overcoming the difficulties of representation. But note the forest setting, and the emphasis on the holly leaves. There is a distinct emphasis on nature as apart from the castle far away in the background.

Then, for the Merwin translation, there is probably the most disturbing cover image (fig. 7). It is a face with a helmet, but with the wide, socket-like eyes and gaping, or perhaps screaming mouth it looks almost like a skull, bathed in mysterious green light, perhaps the unearthly green referred to by Olivier Simonin elsewhere in this volume. The connotations are of supernatural horror. Here the Green Knight (if that is who it is) is an image of death.

I'll now move to adaptations briefly. These, of course, have additional representational constraints depending on the manner of adaptation; they're not necessarily meant to represent the character in the poem directly. But they still have their origin in the poem, and reflect what can be found there. In an image from the comic book by Penman and Reppion, the Green Knight is a jolly figure, surrounded by foliage (fig. 8). The TV show Adventure Time has a version of the character in one episode, who can be seen here shot from below: a mysterious, anonymous, threatening figure (fig. 9). Then finally let's turn to the live action adaptations: Sean Connery's version of the character, looking wild, but basically like Sean Connery, in *Sword of the Valiant* (fig.

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of the intended reference is inferable from the astonished reaction he generates and the otherwise carefully described ubiquity of the colour. This inference is also supported by the description of the Green Knight's appearance as he appears at the Green Chapel later in the poem: "And þe gome in þe grene gered as fyrst, / Boþe þe lyre and þe leggez, lokkez and berde" ("And the man in the green, dressed as at first, both the cheek and the legs, locks and beard"; 2227-2228). The word *lyre* could mean "cheek" or "face" but was frequently used to refer to a character's complexion (MED "ler n."). Though there is also syntactic ambiguity here -- are we being told the "gome" is dressed "in þe grene" or is "þe gome in þe grene" simply an epithet? -- it is difficult to think what else might be meant by the "lyre" being "gered" than that it is coloured green. Nonetheless, in the face of all the ambiguous evidence, it is impossible to be certain.

10); a green-haired, green-skinned, red-eyed, far more sinister version from the 1991 TV adaptation (fig. 11); and finally the uncanny, tree-like monster of the David Lowery adaptation (fig. 12).

What we have, then, is a large variety of representations, with distinctly different emphases. But I would argue that all of them have a clear (if not completely faithful) relationship with the presentation of the Green Knight in the poem. How is this possible? One answer, at least, is ambiguity.

Ambiguity and Character

I will work here with a very simple definition of ambiguity: *one form, more than one meaning.*[2] If *character* is our form, the first question to ask is how characters can be meaningful. They are not meaningful in the same way that a word is meaningful, of course. But they are part of a communication process that proceeds, depending on how we see it, from author or text to reader, and they carry meanings as part of this. For the purposes of this paper I will say that these meanings are assigned in instances of interpretation. Taking the text as the basis for interpretation, we can thus make arguments that an interpretation is stated or implied in the text, or, in other words, that the text interprets a character in a certain way or suggests certain interpretations. Such a view assumes a collaboration between text and reader.

The problem, though, is that we can assign any number of meanings to a character. Characters are generally complex discursive constructions containing a lot of information. For example, we can easily take the presentation of Arthur in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and adduce that he is courteous, valiant, violent or naïve, declaring all of these as potential meanings that Arthur may express. It is the same problem as when we try to say that a literary work is ambiguous because you can have multiple interpretations of it: we're not saying very much, because that's the case with all literary works (Rimmon 12). So it is trivial to say that because a character is a form with more than one meaning it is ambiguous. All characters are ambiguous in this way. Even personifications, which may have just one quality, usually suggest several things about that quality.

In order to make the word *ambiguous* useful then, we have to say that the meanings that a character gives rise to are not compatible. That means that we have contradictory notions of what they are, what qualities they possess, what role they play in the text, etc. We can call this a *disjunctive* ambiguity (Rimmon 25). To reference an old debate: is Satan the hero or the villain of *Paradise Lost*? He cannot really be both, but there are features in the text that give rise to both interpretations. So we get this vacillation between mutually incompatible possibilities.

The fact that we get such wildly different visual interpretations of the Green Knight is a good sign that there is also something ambiguous about the character in the poem. So let us investigate to see whether this is indeed the case.

Looking for Ambiguity

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[2] A much more thorough definition will appear in my forthcoming PhD dissertation, *Ambiguity and Character in* Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. For more on the problem of ambiguity and character, see Zirker and Potysch.

How do we find out whether a character is (disjunctively) ambiguous? We are looking either for conflicting interpretations of the character in the text, or conflicting information about the character, which gives rise to conflicting interpretations.

Conflicting interpretations of the Green Knight can be found in the text almost immediately after he appears for the first time. He has just interrupted the Christmas festivities at Arthur's court and, according to custom, an adventure has begun. But before the action proper occurs we have a weighty introductory description, which at about 88 lines is one of the longest in the text. Just a few lines into the description, the narrator states: "Half etayn in erde I hope þat he were, / Bot mon most I algate mynn hym to bene ("half-giant on earth I believe that he may be, but the biggest man I at any rate think him to be"; 140-41).

The narrator is, to use a term from narratology, *extradiegetic*: they narrate the story from outside of the diegesis, the story-world established by the act of narrating. Furthermore, they do so with a perspective that is largely impersonal. Impersonal enough so that we can call them "they" instead of "he" or "she": they are a storytelling voice, without a gender or other personal attributes. Nonetheless, at this moment they intrude into the world of the text, speaking with an "I", and using subjective verbs of conjecture (*hope, mynn*), and the subjunctive (*were, bene*). Once more employing a term from narratology, we can categorise this as a *metalepsis*: the narrator breaches the invisible barrier that separates them from the story and speaks as if they were a direct witness of events, with the personal voice of an observer. The point of this is to establish uncertainty: who or what is it that has entered King Arthur's court? Is it a half-giant or simply the biggest man?

So we already seem to have conflicting interpretations of the Green Knight, in the form of an ambiguity between two images: the Half-Giant and the Biggest Man. The subjective and subjunctive verbs tell us that these are just hypotheses. These will be complemented and extended, and also complicated, by what happens next.

In the same introductory description we get a number of lines on the Green Knight's clothes, including the following:

> Ande al grayþed in grene þis gome and his wedes:
> A strayte cote ful streȝt, þat stek on his sides,
> A meré mantile abof, mensked withinne
> With pelure pured apert, þe pane ful clene
> With blyþe blaunner ful bryȝt, and his hod boþe,
> Þat watz laȝt fro his lokkez and layde on his schulderes (151-56)

> ("And all arrayed in green this man and his clothes: a close-fitting tunic full straight, which clung to his sides, a merry cloak above, adorned within with trimmed fur exposed, the edging full clean with lovely fine fur full bright, and his hood as well, which was drawn back from his locks and laid on his shoulders.")

I am calling this part of the description The Well-Dressed Man. The emphasis is on the Green Knight as an attractive human figure in fashionable courtly dress: "strayte cote", "meré mantile abof, mensked withinne", "pelure pured apert". Key for our purposes is the word *apert*, which I've translated as "exposed". The visibility of the cloak is emphasised. But just a little further on we read a description of his hair that offers a very different image:

> Fayre fannand fax vmbefoldes his schulderes;
> A much berd as a busk ouer his brest henges,
> Þat wyth his hiȝlich here þat of his hed reches
> Watz euesed al vmbetorne abof his elbowes,
> Þat half his armes þer-vnder were halched in þe wyse
> Of a kyngez capados þat closes his swyre (181-86)

> ("Fair fanning head-hair enfolds his shoulders; a great beard, like a bush, hangs over his breast, which with his glorious hair that extends from his head was trimmed all around above his elbows, so that half his arms were enclosed in the manner of a king's cape which encircles his neck.")

The "close-fitting tunic" and the "merry cloak" with its "exposed" fur trimming and the hood laid over the shoulders has been replaced in just a few lines by "Fayre fannand fax" and "A much berd" – a huge, long growth of beard and head-hair which enfolds him down to the elbows. I call this part of the description The Hairy Monster. This is, admittedly, already an interpretation. But I think it's safe to say that such hair evokes monstrousness – perhaps the monstrousness of the wild man, as Larry D. Benson suggested many years ago (60). And, most importantly, as Benson also noted (61), the description of the Hairy Monster seems to contradict the description of the Well-Dressed Man. However possible it might be to fudge a harmonisation of these impressions, such a harmonisation doesn't happen in the description. What we get in the description are successive images of the character that conflict with each other, suggesting on the one hand something human, and on the other something monstrous. So it looks like we've found a pattern of ambiguity.

The Green Knight's human features are evident and unitary: his clothes, equipment and speech all mark him out as at least *resembling* human. His monstrous features are also evident but more diffuse.

As well as his enormous size and hairiness, there is the fact that he is, of course, green. It's difficult to say whether there is the suggestion of a particular monster here, though Gawain later seems to infer from his green clothes that he is the devil (2191-94). The association with fairies may be a later development (Brewer 185).[3] But regardless, green is obviously not ordinarily the colour of human hair – or skin, if we are to see that as implied.

We're also told that he has red eyes, which he puts to somewhat grotesque use: "runischly his rede yȝen he reled aboute" ("fiercely [or *strangely*] his red eyes he rolled about"; 304). Again, it's not clear that a particular monster is meant by this, but it's not an ordinary human eye colour.

There are also the natural associations: the colour green, the bush-like beard, the holly "Þat is grattest in grene when greuez ar bare". In the reception of the poem, these have often been used to associate the Green Knight with pagan mythology (summarised in Millett 139). There is little evidence of this in the poem, except perhaps in a very indirect, abstract way. But the associations are suggestive, and may serve to hint at the Green Knight as a figure of the wilderness, whether as a wild man, or something else.

In addition to narratorial description, we have the interpretations of characters in the poem. The court see him as "fantoum and fayryȝe" (240) (the word *fayryȝe* ambiguous between the type of being and the supernatural magic associated with them). Later they describe him in terms such as an "an aluisch mon" (681). The guide

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[3] Michel Pastoureau notes the connection to fairies but only based on 17th-century tales, and interprets the green of the Green Knight as a symbol of fortune (165, 105).

in his apprehension-inducing presentation of the character repeats elements from the initial description, such as the Green Knight's superlative size (2100), but also insists on his indiscriminate violence: "For he is a mon methles, and mercy non vses, / For be hit chorle oþer chaplayn þat bi þe chapel rydes, / Monk oþer masseprest, oþer any mon elles, / Hym þynk as queme hym to quelle as quyk go hymseluen" ("For he is a violent man and doesn't exercise mercy. For whether it's commoner or chaplain that rides by the chapel, monk or ordained priest, or any other man, it seems to him as pleasant to kill him as to go on living himself"; 2107-9). The Green Knight is imagined here as a merciless killer, outside of the distinctions and norms of human social life, especially religious life. And Gawain takes the description to be of something like a wild man when he says he will, despite the guide's exhortations, go to the Green Chapel, "Þaʒe he be a sturn knape / To stiʒtel, and stad with staue" ("though he may be a cruel man to deal with, and armed with a club"; 2132-3). The "staue" or club was the wild man's weapon of choice (Bernheimer 1). Finally, Gawain, when he gets to the Green Chapel, disoriented and panicking at the grim surroundings, suspects the Green Knight might be the devil: "Now I fele hit is þe fende […] / Þat hatz stoken me þis steuen to strye me here." ("Now I feel it is the fiend […] that has made this arrangement with me to destroy me here"; 2193-4).

What all this shows is that there isn't just one monster in the discourse. There are numerous possibilities. Thus Benson is being too reductive when he describes the Green Knight as a composite of "the literary wild man" and "the literary green man" (90). The "wild man" might be evoked – by the hairiness, the natural associations, the guide's warnings – but the character cannot be half-reduced to this. As for the green man, we will leave him aside here, as I'm not fully convinced of his medieval reality, even in the textually grounded form that Benson tries to give it.[4]

I think we can specify the following monsters as discursively present: *Half-Giant / Wild Man / Fairy / Apparition / Devil* – and *Other*, considering that some monstrous features do not clearly point to a specific type of being. Not all of these creatures are incompatible, but not all of them are compatible, and the global ambiguity they help point to is certainly made up of incompatible terms. This is best described as *Man / Monster*, with the term *Monster* being additionally ambiguous as just outlined. So we have levels of ambiguity – a higher-level ambiguity with lower-level ones contributing to it.

Three Ambiguities

Our analysis has thus given us the first of our three guiding ambiguities: *Man / Monster*. We can categorise this ambiguity according to three aspects: type, temporality and narrative function.

It is best seen as an *epistemic* ambiguity in that it is related to our knowledge (Rohmann et al. 124). Based on the information we are given throughout the narrative, different hypotheses are available: the Green Knight is either a man or some kind of monster. But, until the end, we are not able to decide which of these is correct. Because we are given the material to make such a decision at the end, we could also say that this is a *temporary* ambiguity: the Green Knight turns out to be the human Lord Bercilak. (This categorisation should be taken

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[4] There is no room here to examine this problem in full, but it is worth noting that investigations by Kathleen Basford and Roy Judge in the 1970s (the decade after Benson was working) dismantled much of the original thesis by Lady Raglan that the foliate heads seen often in church architecture depict, along with various other phenomena of folk tradition, a figure of ancient provenance, representing sacred vegetal power, and known as the Green Man. Bella Millett, the decade after, then made a largely convincing (if reductive) attack on the use of the figure in interpretations of the Green Knight (148). Benson, to be fair, was already somewhat sceptical of readings that would make the Green Knight a green man in Raglan's sense, but his "literary green man" nonetheless replicates this tradition of criticism by assuming a unitary figure. The examples he gives are largely personifications of spring or characters whose green clothing evokes spring, and it's not clear why the idea of a "green man" is necessary to explain this.

advisedly, however. The end is somewhat complicated, and the disambiguation far from certain, as we shall see.) The ambiguity's narrative function is to increase the sense of *mystery* around the Green Knight. There is an open question in the text: who or what is he? *Man* and *Monster* are two possible ways of answering this. But until the end we never settle on one term, or even one monster – the mystery is constantly renewed. And the end, as I said, is complicated, and may not fully dissolve the mystery.

Man / Monster is a useful ambiguity, I think, which helps us to understand how the text creates a mystery around the Green Knight. But it is far from explaining or synthesising all the different dynamics of confusion and contradiction. To show why, let us return to the Half-Giant and the Biggest Man. Here I have put the lines we looked at earlier in their context, which is the opening of the description. Drawing on Benson once again (59), we can divide this passage into two:

The Half-Giant	The Biggest Man
Þer hales in at þe halle dor an aghlich mayster, On þe most on þe molde on mesure hyghe; Fro þe swyre to þe swange so sware and so þik, And his lyndes and his lymes so longe and so grete, Half etayn in erde I hope þat he were, (136-40)	Bot mon most I algate mynn hym to bene, And þat þe myriest in his muckel þat myȝt ride; For of bak and of brest al were his bodi sturne, Both his wombe and his wast were worthily smale, And alle his fetures folȝande, in forme þat he hade, ful clene (141-46)
(There comes in at the door a fearsome lord, the very biggest on earth of height in measure. From the neck to the middle so square and so thick-set, and his loins and his limbs so long and so great, that half-giant on earth I believe that he may be...)	(... but the biggest man I at any rate think him to be, and the handsomest of his size that might ride, for although in back and of breast was his body strong, both his stomach and his waist were worthily small, and all the features that he had following in form, full clean.)

The Half-Giant is indeed monstrous, but this monstrousness is also in service of another idea: that he is a threat. Thus he is described as "aghlich", and his body with words like "sware " "þik," "longe" and "grete", suggesting intimidating size and power, and also perhaps a kind of ugliness. When we move over to the Biggest Man, it is not only that he is now seen as possibly human, but that the intimidating effect of his size and power is mitigated by positive aesthetic qualities: he is the "myriest" of his size, his "wombe and wast" now "worthily smale", his "fetures… ful clene". Not only are these descriptions very different, there is even an apparently direct contradiction in the puzzling contrast between the square, thick-set "swange" ("middle") and a worthily small "wast". It is difficult to be precise about these words but it's clear that they both refer to roughly the same part of the body.

Once again, then, we have a juxtaposition of contradictory impressions: one monstrous, threatening and ugly, the other human, less threatening, and attractive. In most scholarship on the poem the analysis mirrors the way the qualities are organised here, conceptualising the Green Knight according to a duality. Thus J. A. Burrow, for example, says that the "fundamental form" of the Green Knight's ambiguity is the combination of "the

monstrous-supernatural and the merry-human" (13).[5] Leaving aside the problem that half-giants are not necessarily supernatural, we can see how this might describe what's happening with the Half-Giant and the Biggest Man. On the one hand a monster, who conveys threat and ugliness, and on the other a pleasant human figure, who conveys amity and beauty.

The problem with this type of analysis can be seen if we juxtapose the Biggest Man with the Hairy Monster:

The Biggest Man	The Hairy Monster
Bot mon most I algate mynn hym to bene, And þat þe myriest in his muckel þat myȝt ride; For of bak and of brest al were his bodi sturne, Both his wombe and his wast were worthily smale, And alle his fetures folȝande, in forme þat he hade, ful clene (141-46) (... but the biggest man I at any rate think him to be, and the handsomest of his size that might ride, for although in back and of breast was his body strong, both his stomach and his waist were worthily small, and all the features that he had following in form, full clean.)	Fayre fannand fax vmbefoldes his schulderes; A much berd as a busk ouer his brest henges, Þat wyth his hiȝlich here þat of his hed reches Watz euesed al vmbetorne abof his elbowes, Þat half his armes þer-vnder were halched in þe wyse Of a kyngez capados þat closes his swyre (181-86) (Fair fanning head-hair enfolds his shoulders; as much beard as a bush hangs over his breast, which with his glorious hair that extends from his head was trimmed all around above his elbows, so that half his arms were enclosed in the manner of a king's cape which encircles his neck.)

If the Green Knight were organised according to a duality, we would expect to see here a distinction similar to that between the Biggest Man and the Half-Giant – an attractive, friendly human on the one hand and on the other a threatening, repulsive monster. What we find is actually an attractive man on the one hand and an *attractive monster* on the other. The aesthetic qualities that earlier provided a contrast between the more human and more monstrous figure have now migrated to the monster, and the idea of the monster as a threat is thus softened in the same way that the beautiful Biggest Man softened the threat of the Half-Giant. In order to understand such dynamics, then, we need two other guiding ambiguities.

The first is *Friend / Foe*. This relates to whether the Green Knight is a threat, first to the court, then to Gawain. It is once more an epistemic ambiguity. The situation is again that the information we are given (or not given) gives rise to two hypotheses: is the Green Knight friendly or hostile? I am even less certain than in the case of *Man / Monster* that this one is a temporary ambiguity in the true sense, but it is worth highlighting that to some extent he turns out to be a friend to Gawain, or at least not the foe that the guide paints him to be. The narrative function that this ambiguity upholds for its duration is *suspense*. Unlike *Man / Monster*, it is not a matter of introducing a puzzle into the narrative, an uncertainty as to the truth about the Green Knight, but rather of inducing a feeling of anxiety about what will happen.

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[5] Even Lawrence Besserman, who I read while finishing this paper and whose more complex analysis is in some ways closer to mine, understands the Green Knight according to duality. He posits "a cluster of antithetical attributes […] in constant dynamic play", but reduces these to a "double-image" (227-28). The Green Knight then becomes something like the famous duck-rabbit image: you can either see it as a rabbit or see it as a duck but not both at the same time.

The monstrous features, along with his rudeness, his fierce manner and the axe he is carrying are more likely to suggest he is a foe, while the human features, as well as other features such as the fact that he isn't wearing any shoes, his lack of armour and the holly, are more likely to suggest friend. (But note that the hairy monster is less threatening because beautiful, and holly is disturbingly prickly in the way that an olive branch is not: many features are not stably one thing.)

Our third and final ambiguity is *Beautiful / Repulsive*. This is perhaps the lesser of the three but it nonetheless plays an important role. Let's call it an *aesthetic* ambiguity. It's not to do with knowledge but with the curious realm of aesthetic judgement: is the Green Knight beautiful or not? This is of obvious importance in medieval romance, where descriptions of beautiful things play such a key role. Its function, however, is more difficult to pin down. It is in in a supportive role to the other ambiguities, but it also serves as a wildcard, disrupting the convergence of the ambiguities upon a duality.

Thus, as I've shown, sometimes these three ambiguities work together to establish a negative-positive polarity, as in the case of the Half-Giant and the Biggest Man: the negative image of the Half-Giant, who appears as a monster and probable foe, repulsive in his squareness, melts into the positive image of the Biggest Man whose beautiful form seems to indicate worthiness, and possibly, just possibly, a friend. But they don't always establish a polarity, as we saw when we juxtaposed the Well-Dressed Man and the Hairy Monster. The attractive image of the Well-Dressed Man, who, like the Biggest Man, could possibly be seen as a friend, is followed by the Hairy Monster, strange but nonetheless attractive, his monstrousness perhaps suggesting threat, but his attractiveness – doesn't it undermine the sense of threat?

We can see from this how dynamic an ambiguity *Friend / Foe* is, and how open to interpretation. And also how the attractive qualities influence the line of interpretation by undercutting or suspending the sense of threat.

We can also see this in the case of the axe. It is described in threatening terms at first, as "hoge and vnmete, / A spetos sparþe" ("huge and immense, a cruel battle-axe"; 208-9). But shortly afterwards it becomes a beautiful and admirable object, "al bigrauen with grene in gracios werkes; / Wyth tryed tasselez þerto tacched innoghe / On botounz of þe bryȝt grene brayden ful ryche" ("all engraved with green in pleasing designs […], choice tassels fully attached with buttons of bright green, embroidered full rich"; 216-20). We have here something like the garden path constructions Ad Putter discusses in his contribution to this volume (see Ad Putter's article). Except the resolution is deferred – at least until the end, to which we move on now.

The End

At the end of the poem, with the Green Knight's explanations, the state of our knowledge changes. We learn that he is the human Lord Bercilak. The ambiguity *Man / Monster* is to some degree disambiguated. And yet we are never quite sure what he was meant to be, or what exactly motivated all the different impressions given to us. It is true that he was only a temporary monster, but the ambiguity of which monster he was is not temporary.

Likewise, we learn at the end that the Green Knight is not the kind of foe that the guide suggests he is, or Gawain fears he is, but his alliance with Morgan le Fay makes it difficult to describe him as a *friend* exactly. The suspense the ambiguity generated is terminated. But not without unease.

We also learn that the repulsive qualities of the Green Knight were temporary, and indeed functional, in that he was supposed to be shockingly, even fatally repulsive to Guinevere. This might be the most clearly temporary ambiguity, and yet I'm not sure it resolves retrospectively the aesthetic confusion of the first Fitt.

Thus when he leaves us at the end of the text, going "Whiderwarde-so-euer he wolde", he does not leave us with a resolved image, but an ambiguous portrait, or a portrait made up of many different impressions, which do not cohere into a single, unified form. This is what accounts, I think, for the diversity of representations. He is indeed…
… beautiful (as in fig. 2)
… ugly (as in fig. 11)
… a friend (as in fig. 8)
… a foe (as in fig. 7)
… a man (as in fig. 5)
… a monster (fig. 3)…

This brings us to our final image (fig. 13) from the exhibition by David Balade that accompanies this conference. Here the Green Knight is human and yet otherworldly, standing with his severed head in his hand and yet beautiful, and gazing at Gawain with what seems to me an almost tender look. This seems as fitting tribute as any to the deep mystery of the Green Knight in the poem.

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