Colours in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

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How colours are used for description in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a crucial question, especially with respect to green, whose significance and polysemy have been much commented on[1]. Yet, all the basic colours of the Western medieval world are to be found in this Arthurian romance in verse, and they contribute to making the text and the images it evokes more vivid and colourful. My purpose here is to study the use of colours in *SGGK*, drawing on the life-long work of the historian of colours Michel Pastoureau, as well as on some simple linguistic notions, in order to analyse how colours are combined within a broader, culturally-constructed, conceptual system.

Western medieval conception of colours in perspective

The Middle Ages inherited Aristotle's view that six colours were basic and that each could be located on a scale from the brightest (white) to the darkest (black), with yellow, red, green and blue in-between:

WHITE > YELLOW > RED > GREEN > BLUE > BLACK

Red and green are in close propinquity in this classification, and white and black are not denied the status of proper colours, which might come as a surprise to the modern reader. In addition, orange was lacking (it started to be distinguished from Medieval Latin *rufus* – or sometimes *russus* – that was used to denote the colour of red hair, at the end of the Middle Ages[2]), and purple was thought of as a kind of (sub-)black, as its name in Medieval Latin, *subniger*, suggests[3]. Even though the same range of colours was experienced by medieval people, the eye was educated differently then, so that colour and colours did not have the same significance.

Aristotle's classification, which substantially differs from the modern, post-Newtonian conception of colours, is taken up and disseminated by 13th-century encyclopaedists, among whom Bartholomaeus Anglicus features prominently[4]. The traditional, ancient classification is also enshrined in heraldic practice: the six basic colours were the only ones that are recognized and widely used for coats of arms, with the late and inconspicuous addition of purple in the 13th century[5], which remains uncommon and little-liked as a colour throughout the Middle Ages[6]. Other colours are also seen and named, but they are deemed to be non-basic, like brown ("a second-class colour"[7]), which is perhaps less of a colour than the kind of coloration that cloth or material takes once dirty or after its colour has faded.

[1] See, e.g., Derek Brewer, "The Colour Green", and Claire Vial, "Fêtes et saisons dans *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*".
[2] Michel Pastoureau, *Jaune*, 170.
[3] Michel Pastoureau, *Noir*, 120.
[4] Michel Pastoureau, *Les Couleurs au Moyen Âge*, 27.
[5] *Ibid.*, 124.
[6] *Ibid.*, 303.
[7] *Ibid.*, 55.

The diachronic evolutionary sequence for the historical rise of basic colour terms in languages has been explored cross-linguistically, most notably by Berlin and Kay, whose findings I summarize here, in its 1969 version, in a simplified, diagrammatic form:

Stage I	Stage II	Stage III	Stage IV	Stage V	Stage VI	S.VII
white & black	+ red	+ green Or + yellow	+ yellow Or + green	+ blue	+ brown	…

This general account has been refined and revised through time[8], but this initial presentation will do for the present purpose, as it seems to be valid for Western civilization. It postulates that cultures will start and recognize the colour red (stage II) after first distinguishing between white and black (stage I), and then either green or yellow (stages III) and, subsequently, both colours (stage IV), before blue (stage V), brown (stage VI) and then other colours (stage VII). Two important human priorities in colour distinction, proposed by Kay and Maffi (1999), are especially relevant for us[9]:

1/ the need to distinguish between black and white
2/ the need to distinguish red

Priority (1) is the need to contrast light with darkness (as Aristotle does in his classification), and the importance of this distinction is obvious in Old English (OE) poetry[10], where colour terms are scarce as opposed to terms denoting contrast (and what we now see as colour terms might also have been used to indicate brightness or the lack of it). The Later Middle Ages are more colour-conscious – a fact correlated with the rise of heraldry – although the opposition between light and darkness remains all-important. Concerning (2), red is the archetypal colour in Europe till the end of the Middle Ages (at least). Men were first able to use pigments to paint and dye successfully within the range of red hues. As a result, red is the most prominent colour and connotes beauty, richness and power (for the latter two, one should keep in mind the use of imperial red in Rome and its obvious impact on the medieval mind).

In the Middle Ages, the most significant opposition was not between white and black, but between white and red, as evidenced by the colours then used for the two opposing sides at chess[11], as well as in Chrétien's *Perceval, the Story of the Grail*, which contains several scenes in which the opposition features prominently: the apparition of the Grail (the red blood on a white lance, the grail radiating with light, adorned with rubies), Perceval's fight with a red knight (implicitly contrasted to a white knight) and his prolonged musing over the red blood that a goose left on snow, reminding him of the features of his lady's face[12].

[8] See, esp., C. P. Biggam, *The Semantics of Colour*, 70-85, for an overview.
[9] The third one is the need to distinguish between warm and cold colours, but the opposition between colours deemed warm and cold is perhaps not so central and universal since it can be shown to have evolved through time (*cf.* Pastoureau, *les Couleurs*, 72-73).
[10] See William Meade, « Colour in Old English Poetry ».
[11] Michel Pastoureau, *Blanc*, 74-76: the chess pieces changed from black and red (their colours in Muslim countries, from which the game was imported into Europe) to red and white in the course of the 11th century, before they started to turn black and white at the end of the Middle Ages and remained so from the 16th century onwards.
[12] *Ibid.*, 76-80.

Following Aristotle, medieval scholars conceived of colour either as some matter or substance covering things, or as light that has lost some of its (full) intensity[13]. If considered as matter, red is the prototypical colour and, if considered as a degree of light reflection, white is the first among them and black an almost full deprivation of light intensity. This goes some way towards explaining the significance of the opposition between red and white in European medieval culture and the symbolic prevalence of red, white and black throughout the Middle Ages (especially in the early Middle Ages[14]). The importance of this tripartite system can even be seen in a passage from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (l. 950-963), which contains most of the colour terms found in the poem.

An illustration

When Gawain sees Bertilak's wife for the first time, she is accompanied by an elderly lady with whom she stands in stark contrast, on which the poet aptly plays in his striking description[15]:

> *Bot unlyke on to loke þo ladyes were,*
> *For if þe ȝonge was ȝep, **ȝolȝe** was þat oþer.*
> *Riche **red** on þat on rayled aywhere,*
> *Rugh ronkled chekez þat oþer on rolled.*
> *Kerchofes of þat on wyth mony cler perlez,*
> *Hir brest and hir bryȝt þrote, bare displayed,*
> *Schon schyrer þen snawe þat schedes on hillez.*
> *Þat oþer wyth a gorger was gered over þe swyre,*
> *Chymbled over hir **blake** chyn with chalk-**whyte** vayles,*
> *Hir frount folden in sylk, enfoubled aywhere*
> *Turet and treleted with tryflez aboute,*
> *Þat noȝt was bare of þat burde bot þe **blake** broȝes,*
> *Þe tweyne yȝen and þe nase, þe nakede lyppez—*
> *And þose were soure to se and sellyly blered.*
> (v. 950-963)[16]
>
> Those ladies were not the least bit alike:
> one woman was young, one withered by years.
> The body of the beauty seemed to bloom with blood,
> the cheeks of the crone were wattled and slack.
> One was clothed in a kerchief clustered with pearls
> which shone like snow-snow on the slopes
> of her upper breast and bright bare throat.
> The other was noosed and knotted at the neck,
> her chin enveloped in chalk-white veils,
> her forehead fully enfolded in silk
> with detailed designs at the edges and hems;
> nothing bare, except for the black of her brows
> and the eyes and nose and naked lips

[13] Pastoureau, *Les Couleurs*, 37.
[14] Pastoureau, *Noir*, 54.
[15] See Derek Pearsall, "Rhetorical 'Descriptio' in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*", for this type of rhetorical portrayal.
[16] I use my own edition of the text here and in the rest of this article. Colour names appear in bold type and words that connote brightness and colour are underlined.

which were chapped and bleared and a sorrowful sight.[17]

The first occurrence of a colour name is *ȝolȝe* (yellow), which indicates mature age and decay with respect to the old lady: yellow is, among other things, the colour of illness, bile and urine[18]. The ancient lady's yellowness or sallowness is reinforced by the mention of her bleary eyes (l. 963), potentially implying yellow, semi-liquid matter. In late medieval writings, with authors that relish analogies and comparisons, yellow stands for unhealth and the waning of life in the human life cycle and Autumn for the four seasons of the year[19]:

	WHITE	BLUE	GREEN	RED	YELLOW	BLACK
Age:	Infancy	Early Adolescence	Youth	Maturity	Decline	Old Age
Season:			Spring	Summer	Autumn	Winter

Black was then seen as a sign of old age, which might explain why her chin is described as black, just as her brow. It may also strongly convey the notions of sin, evil and death, connected to the Devil, representing what Pastoureau calls "bad black"[20]. This is all the more likely since the old lady is, of course, none other than Morgan le Faye. What characterizes her is a lack or deprivation of light: even the white that she wears is dull and crude, especially when compared to the radiant white that the poet associates with the young lady (note the terms and adjectives conveying the notion of light in her description).

In Medieval Latin, white could be designated by *albus* (dull, crude white, negatively connoted) or *candidus* (luminous, bright, pleasant)[21], just as in classical Latin[22]. The chalk-white of the old lady's veils is *albus*, while the young lady's skin is *candidus*, meaning purity and beauty in a noble lady[23]. The comparison of her skin with snow falling by a hillside is very suggestive (of the curves of her breast and the immaculate radiant whiteness of her skin). The contrast between the two ladies is the one of light as opposed to deprivation of light (with black and dull white), with the additional gloss of red for the young lady, so that she fully conforms to the medieval canon of feminine beauty. Red, which usually connotes beauty, love and glory, may be used here to signify vitality and vivacity (both being connected to the presence of fresh, vivid and therefore beautiful – *riche* – blood).

Occurrences of colour terms in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and their significance

When culling occurrences of colour terms from the poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, my expectation was that I would find a majority of occurrences for the word *green*, owing to its omnipresence in the poem, and then many other for the "cardinal" colour terms *white, black*

[17] The translation given here, as elsewhere, is Armitage's (2007).
[18] Pastoureau, *Jaune*, 102.
[19] *Ibid.*
[20] Pastoureau, *Noir*, 57-58.
[21] Pastoureau, *Les Couleurs*, 38.
[22] A similar distinction was made in Germanic languages, including Middle English, with the opposition between *wit* (dull white) and *blank* (bright white): see Pastoureau, *Les Couleurs*, 47-48.
[23] The same type of contrast between those two whites is found when the Green Knight says of Gawain that he is "*As perle bi þe white pese*" when compared to other knights (l. 2364).

and *red*, because of the prevalence of those colours in medieval culture. The results obtained confirm this initial guess:

Colour term (non-basic colours being in *italics*)	Used descriptively:	Part of proper name:	Part of periphrasis used as proper name / Lexical unit (idiom)
GRENE	29	11 (*Grene Chapel*)	11 (*gome in grene…*)
RED	10		
WHYT/WHIT	8		
BLAK	2		
BLW	1		
ȝOLȝE	1		
BROUN	1 or 2		
GRAY	2		1 (*gray morne*)

Occurrences of *grene* make up more than half the occurrences, even when discounting instances in which it is used as part of a proper name (to designate the "*Grene Chapel*"), or as part of a periphrasis to refer to the Green Knight – as in *þe gome in þe grene* (l. 405, 2227, 2266), *þe grene knyȝt* (l. 390, 417), *þe wyȝe wruxled in grene* (l. 2191), …. Red, white and black make up more than a third of the occurrences in the same conditions, and black is mentioned only twice in the excerpt just examined. The predominance of white and red is confirmed. Other basic colour terms come up, but they are highly infrequent. Non-basic colour terms are also to be found. Let us start with their analysis.

Brown is almost synonymous with dark in Middle English (see sense 1 for that word in the *Middle English Dictionary*). Its semantic compass did only partly overlap with modern usage: the term could indicate that something had been soiled or sullied, turned dull or brownish after losing its initial gloss. It is used without any negative semantic load to describe the rich mantle that Gawain is given when arriving at Bertilak's castle (l. 878-879), and to refer metonymically to the arrows biting the hides of deer:

> *Þat bigly bote on þe broun with ful brode hedez.* (l. 1162)
> biting through hides with their broad heads.

It is debatable whether *broun* should count here as a colour term, since it denotes the hides of the deer (perhaps through a reference to their hair): *Broun* does not straightforwardly designate a colour on this line. Notwithstanding, brown (among other colours) can also aptly be evoked through the mention of an animal, like the beaver[24]:

> *Brode, bryȝt was his berde and al bever-hwed.* (l. 845)
> with a bushy beard as red as a beaver's,

Bertilak's beard, described here, is dark and presumably brown. Brown, in Middle English, was polysemous, and it is used in this poem as elsewhere to underscore the shininess of metal (or gems).

[24] *Beaver*, in English, is the nominalized form of Indo-European adjective meaning 'brown' (*Dictionnaire Historique de la Langue Française*, "brun", vol. 1, 525). Armitage's translation is probably too bold here, as red is typically the hair colour of American, as opposed to European, beavers.

Grey (*gray*), another non-basic colour, occurs idiomatically with *morne* (l. 1024) to mean 'crack of dawn', and it is the traditional epithet to characterize the colour of Guinevere's eyes (l. 83), as the eyes of other medieval beauties[25]. The rarity of this eye colour is apparently what makes it very much valued, whether what is meant is blue-grey or actual grey. It is also used to describe the colour of hounds that are greyhounds (l. 1714), as one might expect.

Basic colours include green, to which the last main section is fully devoted. Black and white have already been discussed, as well as yellow and red, but there is much more to say about red, which is "the archetypal colour", since it was the first to be produced expertly, in paint and then in tincture[26]. Red features prominently on Gawain's shield as field colour, on which the (gold) pentangle is painted. Red can be seen as representing Gawain just as green is the Green Knight's symbolic colour, and both may also be opposed to blue, as demonstrated in the next section.

Red and blue

Red occurs four times (out of ten) as an adjective modifying the noun *gold*. The two colours (gold and yellow being fully equivalent in heraldic practice) are interrelated in Gawain's arms:

> *Þerfore on his schene schelde schapen was the knotte,*
> *Ryally wyth red golde upon rede gowlez,*
> (l. 662-663)
>
> So the star on the spangling shield he sported
> shone royally, in gold, on a ruby red background,

According to Pastoureau, red gold was omnipresent in imperial Byzantium and the redness of gold implied that special attention was given to its material aspect: its weight, its density – and the richness and imperium they denote. Otherwise, the brightness of gold – connected to its purity – was foregrounded[27], as the spurs of the Green Knight, "*Of bryȝt golde*" (l. 159).

Red traditionally stands for nobility and prowess and is the most represented colour on coats of arms[28]. The field and figure of Gawain's arms are the same colour as those of the royal house of England (three gold lions – passant guardant – on a red field), red being the traditional pre-heraldic colour of the Plantagenet family[29]. With Edward III's claim to the French throne, the fleur-de-lys on a blue field was naturally added to the royal coat of arms. Blue was adopted to represent the house of France in the second half of the 12th century: it was the colour that had always been associated with the Capetians, as well as the Virgin. Both facts contributed to promoting blue, in heraldry as in other areas[30].

Red, the most prominent colour on Gawain's shield, was also used by the Church to represent four or five of the seven deadly sins: pride first and foremost, anger and lewdness, sometimes gluttony and even sloth[31]. Gawain is tempted into each one of these in the course of

[25] See Ad Putter & Myra Stokes (eds), *The Works of the* Gawain *Poet*, 420.
[26] Michel Pastoureau, *Rouge*, 9.
[27] Pastoureau, *Les Couleurs*, 187.
[28] *Ibid.*, 242-243.
[29] *Ibid.*, 245-246.
[30] *Ibid.*, 46.
[31] Michel Pastoureau, *Rouge*, 105.

his adventure, but pride appears to be foregrounded, as the gold pentangle proclaims Gawain's perfection to the world, although no one, even him, can be perfect[32].

Red is also the colour of the carbuncle or ruby that Bertilak's lady offers Gawain, and that he refuses. Set on a ring that is itself made of red gold, it exudes opulence (l. 1817-1820):

> *Ho razt hym a riche rynk of red golde werkez,*
> *Wyth a starande ston stondande alofte,*
> *Þat bere blusschande bemez as þe bryzt sunne.*
> *Wyt ze wel hit was worth wele ful hoge.*
>
> She offers him a ring of rich, red gold,
> and the stunning stone set upon it stood proud,
> beaming and burning with the brightness of the sun;
> what wealth it was worth you can well imagine.

To quote Michel Pastoureau on this very precious gem: "This red stone, which appears to shine like burning ashes (hence its Latin name: *carbunculus*), leads the knight into darkness, protects him from the forces of evil and confers him a kind of invulnerability."[33] As observed by Jessica Cooke in an article devoted to the "blushing ring"[34], the red stone is a richer version of and a foil to the green girdle: both promise a kind of invulnerability. Red naturally appears in the romance (without being explicitly mentioned) with other objects or entities, like the sun and, of course, with blood (connoting violence in this case).

Red is also the colour of the fox's hair, though in this case it is blended with yellow in hue as well as semantically, as it takes on some shades of meaning pertaining to yellow – i. e. treachery and lying[35]. It also retains an association with the devil and hell, and the figure of the fox also conjures up the slyness of Renart in the *Roman de Renart*, who is perhaps not unlike Gawain: Gawain is as anxious to escape death and while he cunningly turns down many of the various offers made by the lady, he accepts her last gift, which could preserve his life without compromising his ethics and reputation too blatantly.

Blue occurs only once in the poem, as Gawain wears blue after his confession to the chapel priest:

> *He were a bleaunt of blwe, þat bradde to þe erþe.* (l. 1928)
> His blue robe flowed as far as the floor,

With this description, I infer that the *bleaunt* is a *houpland*, a kind of long-skirted overtunic that was furred and grazed the ground at the end of the 14th century, which was part of the wardrobe of lords and ladies. The fairly vague or general term *bleaunt* may have been chosen for alliterative purposes on this line. John Burrow argues that Gawain wears blue, the colour of faithfulness, just after he has betrayed her and Bertilak by having accepted the green lace without returning it, let alone confessing it, which is highly ironical[36]. Blue is apt to signify faithfulness and loyalty because it is Mary's colour, and it becomes increasingly popular from

[32] Olivier Simonin, "Sire Gauvain et la catégorisation des vices".
[33] *Ibid.*, 89 (my translation).
[34] Jessica Cooke, "The Lady's 'Blushing' Ring in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*".
[35] Pastoureau, *Jaune*, 103-111.
[36] John Burrow, *A Reading of* Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, 111-112.

the 11th century onwards at least partly as a result[37]. Additionally, the theme of betrayal is called to mind by the fact that Gawain illustrates in reverse, in the next scene, when he departs from Bertilak's, the French proverb: *Au lieu de bleu, se vestir de vert* ('to be unfaithful, have a new lover': *DMF*). He may in fact be wearing the green tunic he was given on arrival, underneath his blue gown (*cf.* l. 864-868), and he is about to put on the green girdle soon afterwards in any event. Blue stands for faithfulness, and green for treachery.

The meaning of green in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

22 out of the 29 occurrences of *green*, which are not part of a phrase that is a complex proper name functionally, are found in the first fitt, to describe the Green Knight, his horse and attire. The Green Man is not entirely green, but rather his clothes are, and his hair – likened to that of his steed – glitters green, or at least this is a reasonable inference drawn from:

> And runischly his rede yȝen he reled aboute,
> Bende his bresed broȝez blycande grene,
> Wayved his berde for to wayte whoso wolde ryse.
> (l. 304-306)

> looking left and right, his red eyes rolling
> beneath the bristles of his bushy green brows,
> his beard swishing from side to side.

While the red in his eyes potentially evokes devilishness, his skin does not appear to be green (or, at least, this is never explicitly put), as opposed to his hair and his clothes. The manuscript illustrations never show the Green Knight with a green skin, and he is often referred to with periphrases like *þe wyȝe wruxled in grene* (l. 2091), suggesting that he is green mainly because he is clad in green.

But what kind of green is actually meant? The phrase *enker green* comes up twice to pinpoint the precise hue of green (l. 150, 2477) linked to the Green Knight. It designates a vivid green, which is fully saturated[38], or perhaps a (vivid) dark green (if it derives from *vert encre*[39]). This hue is all the more remarkable and wondrous since, as far as green was concerned, it was very difficult to obtain a stable, saturated dye that did not quickly lose its intensity. As a result of this quintessential lack of stability, green came to denote changeability and, by extension, treachery metaphorically (this is one of the meanings of the green girdle), as well as the notion of fortune and thus play and games, which make up one of the main themes of the romance[40]. The fully-saturated green that the Green Knight wears arouses a sense of wonder in Arthur's court:

> *Ther was lokyng on lenþe þe lude to beholde,*
> *For uch mon had mervayle what hit mene myȝte*
> *Þat a haþel and a horse myȝt such a hwe lache.*

[37] Michel Pastoureau, *Bleu*, 44-47.
[38] Richard Dance, *Words Derived from Old Norse in* Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, 267-268: *enker grene* might be the transposition, in Middle English, of Middle French *vert encre* (*cf.* next footnote), though the form *enker* may just as well have been derived from a Scandinavian word.
[39] The *Dictionnaire du Moyen Français* (*DMF*) defines *vert encre* as dark green (*DMF*, "Vert", "Vert encre").
[40] I am building here on Pastoureau's interpretation of the Green Knight's greenness as symbolizing the Goddess *Fortuna* (Pastoureau, *Vert*, 115).

As growe grene as þe gres and grener hit semed,
Þen grene aumayl on golde glowande bryȝter.
(l. 232-236)

The guests looked on. They gaped and they gawked
and were mute with amazement: what did it mean
that human and horse could develop this hue,
should grow to be grass-green or greener still,
like green enamel emboldened by bright gold?

Furthermore, the Green Knight's wayward behaviour suggests a kind of madness, which is often associated with green (especially when found with yellow – or gold here[41]): Arthur remarks that the request put to him is *nys(e)* (l. 323), that is foolish and nonsensical. As the Green Knight appears on New Year's Day, one of the days marked off for the feast of fools, he may also be conceived of as performing the function of an entertainer here, whether a jester or a mummer[42].

The colour green naturally represents vegetation and, by metonymy, spring, youth and new love. The Green Knight is perhaps an avatar of the green man, an architectural motif and a symbol for renewal, into which some men disguise for festivals celebrating rebirth around the Spring equinox or May 1st [43]. That type of green is described as *vert gai* in Middle French (as opposed to more worrying and sinister *vert perdu*), a light, luminous green, which is fully saturated and attractive[44]. The Green Knight's green may appear to be a token of that category, at first sight at least:

And alle his vesture verayly was clene verdure,
Boþe þe barres of his belt and oþer blyþe stones
Þat were richely rayled in his aray clene
Aboutte hymself and his sadel, upon silk werkez,
Þat were to tor to telle of tryfles þe halve
Þat were enbrauded abof, wyth bryddes and flyȝes,
With gay gaudi of grene, þe golde ay inmyddes.
(l. 161-167)

In all vestments he revealed himself veritably verdant!
From his belt hooks and buckle to the baubles and gems
arrayed so richly around his costume
and adorning the saddle, stitched onto silk.
All the details of his dress are difficult to describe,
embroidered as it was with butterflies and birds,
green beads emblazoned on a background of gold.

Gawain himself is prone to putting on *vert gai*, which hints at his reputation as a lover, his courtesy and youth. The tissue protection for his aventail features parrots among other birds (turtledoves) and truelove plants (green and a symbol for love), and at Bertilak's, he puts on a green tunic that almost makes him an incarnation of Spring (l. 864-868). The same general courtly meaning can be ascribed to the green girdle, although it also represents greed, a sin for

[41] Michel Pastoureau, "Formes et couleurs du désordre".
[42] See Lucy Perry, "Don't Make Me Laugh! Fooling Around in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*", and Tatjana Silec-Plessis & Justine Breton, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.
[43] Pastoureau, *Vert*, 78.
[44] *Ibid*., 99, 124-125.

which Gawain blames himself, and young, hopeful love – or rather impatient love, like the one demonstrated by Bertilak's lady[45].

The Green Knight calls to mind the typical green knight, bearing plain arms of green, who was to be found in the *roman courtois* genre: a young knight whose bold or insolent demeanour upsets the established order[46]. Yet, in spite of being insolent enough and upsetting Arthur and his court, the Green Knight is not young anymore. He taunts Arthur's high table companions as "beardless children" (l. 280) while he himself sports a long bushy beard. Moreover, the Green Knight is too mature and strange for pleasant green (*vert gai*). His shade of green is too dark. The green enamel and gems bedecking what he or his horse wear (l. 161-172, 193), their hue that is said to be greener than grass and brighter than translucent enamel (l. 235-236), point towards a dark green hue that is very vivid. This greenness seems unearthly, as it combines the vividness and intensity of *vert gai* with a dark nuance of green, typical of *vert perdu*[47]. This is why that unusual green was so strange for beholders at Arthur's court, while also appealing to the imagination of a medieval audience. It is also presumably close to that of the holly branch carried by the Green Knight as a (mock) sign of peace. Holly "is greenest when groves are bare" (l. 207), as the poet points out, and it is a sacred tree in Celtic mythology symbolizing the spirits of the dead. Since green is also the colour of what is ominous and unsettling, it is characteristic of the fairy world and elves[48]. Arthur's retinue is not mistaken when deploring Gawain's probable end, "beheaded by an elvish man" (l. 681). The fairy world is a world of spirits and ultimately the land of the dead. In the lay *Yonec* by Marie de France, the lady follows her fairy lover by entering a tumulus and then emerging into a beautiful meadow and land. The Green Knight has been compared to a Grim Reaper, personifying death[49], and at the Green Chapel, which is very much like a tumulus (l. 20175-2184), the whetting of his axe makes one think of the sound of a scythe (l. 2202).

The Green Knight has also been likened to the Devil, who could be painted green (*vert perdu*, starting from the 12th century[50]) or clad in green occasionally, like a hunter in Chaucer's "Friar's Tale"[51]. Gawain himself suggests that the Green Chapel is an ugly oratory (l. 2190), where the Devil might say mass around midnight (l.2187) and the Green Knight perform his devotions, dressed like the Devil (l. 2191-2192). It may be that Morgan le Fay's magic connects the Green Knight both to the Celtic underworld and to the broader, loose category of devilry (or what was regarded as unholy).

Conclusion

The poet uses the colour green in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* very suggestively, to create an intricate web of semantic associations. The figure of the Green Knight itself is ambiguous, epitomizing this poetic art of superimposing several layers of meaning that rest on the very rich polysemy of the colour green in the late Middle Ages. Understanding the medieval conception and connotations of colours, with numerous correspondence schemes now lost to most of our

[45] *Ibid.*, 79, 126.
[46] *Ibid.*, 89.
[47] The *DMF* defines *vert perdu* as dark green ("Vert", "Vert perdu").
[48] Pastoureau, *Vert*, 107. The connection between green and the Celtic underworld was made long ago by R. M. Garret ("The Lay of 'Gawain and the Green Knight'").
[49] A. H. Krappe, "Who *was* the Green Knight?".
[50] Pastoureau, *Vert*, 101.
[51] D. W. Robertson, "Why the Devil Wears Green".

contemporaries, is essential to comprehend *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in its original context and appreciate the poem fully.

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