

An Interpretation of the Hunting Scenes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

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Since Savage's 1928 study¹, it has generally been accepted that the three hunting scenes of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* must reflect in some way the three temptation scenes which take place at the same time in the castle. Most critics have related the three animals to Gawain and have taken them to represent his virtues or his faults, his actual or his potential behaviour². The present interpretation works upon different lines and seeks to link the various kinds of game hunted by Bertilak, as well as the landscapes and the details of the hunt, to the major protagonists in the castle scenes: Gawain, Bertilak, his wife and her double Morgan le Fay.

The hunting scenes and the temptation scenes run on parallel lines: Gawain is "hunted" by the lady as the beasts are by her husband. The interweaving of the scenes reinforces the impression that they mirror each other, and that the outcome of the temptation scene will determine the outcome of the hunt. The mirroring effect is particularly clear in the case of the third hunt, the fox hunt. While dogs and hunters pursue the fox relentlessly, the lady is pressing Gawain in a similarly relentless manner:

...bat prynces of pris depressed hym so pikke,
Nurned hym so neze þe pred... (1770-71)³

"she, queenly and peerless, pressed him so closely,
led him so near the line"

And once Gawain has been defeated, the poet switches to Bertilak with the following words:

He hatz forfaren þis fox þat he folged longe (1895)

"At last the fox he has felled that he followed so long"

as if the capture of the fox was not only the conclusion of the day's hunting but that of a much longer hunt, the three days' testing of Gawain.

For the fox at long last conquered is none other than Gawain. This correspondence was first proposed by Savage⁴, and few have tried to dispute it.

¹ "The Significance of the Hunting Scenes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*", *JEGP*, 27 (1928), 1-15.

² See H. L. Savage, "The Significance of the Hunting Scenes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*"; J. Speirs, "*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*", *Scrutiny*, 6 (1949), 274-300; G. Gallant, "The Three Beasts, Symbols of Temptation in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*", *Annuaire Mediaevale*, 11 (1970), 35-50; P. McClure, "Gawain's *mesure* and the Significance of the Three Hunts in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*", *Neophilologus*, 57 (1973), 375-87; L. Blenkner, "The Three Hunts and Sir Gawain's Triple Fault", *American Benedictine Review* 29 (1978), 227-46; M. C. Ward, "French Ovidian Beasts in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*", *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 79 (1978), 152-61.

³ The edition used is *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. J.R.R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, 2nd ed. revised by N. Davis (Oxford, 1967). Translations are from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl and Sir Orfeo*, transl. J.R.R. Tolkien, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1975.

⁴ "The Significance of the Hunting Scenes", p. 5.

Several points associate Gawain with the fox. To start with, there is identity of colour. The red fur of the fox brings to mind the red of Gawain's shield and clothes, described as follows:

Then þay schewed hym þe schelde, þat was of schyr goulez (619)

"Then they brought him his blazon that was of brilliant gules"

...þat ryol red clope þat ryche watz to schewe (2036)

"the royal red cloth that was rich to behold"

The use of the heraldic word *goulez* implies that red is Gawain's colour not merely through the accident of his wearing a red coat, but in a more fundamental way⁵. Gawain is a solar hero (his strength follows the course of the sun, though this does not appear in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*), and this may account for the choice of the colour.

The fox is well known for its wiles, and its behaviour in the poem is in keeping with this reputation:

And he trantes and tornayeez þurȝ mony tene greue,
Haulounez, and herkenez bi heggez ful ofte. (1707-08)

"He dodges and ever doubles through many a dense coppice,
and looping off he lurks and listens under fences."

The narrator calls it *wyl* "wily" (1728) and *wily* (1905).

Gawain, on the other hand, prides himself on his loyalty: he wears the pentangle on his shield, a sign established by Solomon *in bytoknyng of trawpe* "to betoken Troth" (626). Nothing could be further from his usual behaviour than the wiles of a fox. But on the third day—the day of the fox hunt—he sets loyalty aside and, by accepting the girdle offered by the lady, resorts to wiles on two levels: by cheating in his encounter with the Green Knight, and by breaking his covenant with Bertilak.

Using an object endowed with magical properties to protect oneself in single combat was expressly forbidden by the laws of the time⁶. It is true that the Green Knight had himself made use of magic in the first part of the contest, since he did not die when his head was chopped off; but this gives Gawain no right to do the same. As a perfect knight, Gawain should die rather than cheat. Yet a total reversal of values appears when Gawain's thoughts are revealed:

Myȝt he haf slypped to be unslayn, þe sleȝt were noble. (1858)

"If by some sleight he were not slain, 'twould be a sovereign (*literally* "noble") device."

The use of *slypped* implies transgression, fall, failure: and yet this is what Gawain hopes to do. The oxymoric relation of *sleȝt* ("trick") and *noble* indicates that Gawain has lost his moral bearings. And he promises the lady to *lelly layne* ("on his honor hide", 1863) the girdle from her husband, in yet another oxymoric phrase.

⁵ The red shield is a departure from tradition, for Gawain's shield is usually green. In this poem, of course, a green shield would have clashed with the symbolism of the green knight and green girdle.

⁶ See L. Gross, "Gawain's Acceptance of the Girdle", *American Notes and Queries*, 12 (1974), 154-55, and G. A. Lester, "Gawain's Fault in Terms of Contemporary Law of Arms", *Notes and Queries*, 221 (1976), 392-93.

Gawain's changed nature is manifested in his confession to a priest after accepting the girdle⁷. It is clear that he makes no mention of the girdle, or he would have been made to give it up. Yet he confesses all his sins, at least all those he is aware of:

Pere he schrof hym schyrly and schewed his mysdedeȝ,
Of þe more and þe mynne, and merci besecheȝ (1880-81)

“There he cleanly confessed him and declared his misdeeds,
both the more and the less, and for mercy he begged”

The inescapable conclusion is that at this point Gawain does not realize that he has committed a fault, in other words, that he is no longer the loyal knight but the fox which finds it natural to resort to wiles to preserve its life.

The extent of Gawain's degradation is revealed in what he receives on the third evening in exchange for his three kisses, and as suitable payment for his treachery: a worthless fox skin, *bis foule fox felle* “this foul fox-fell” (1944). And when Bertilak apologizes for the meanness of the present,

‘Inoȝ’, quop Sir Gawayn,
‘I þonk yow, bi þe rode’ (1948-49)

“‘Tis enough,’ then said Gawain.
‘I thank you, by the Rood’”

And the fox skin is truly “enough”: Gawain deserves nothing more.

Like the wily fox, Gawain is a thief. The hunters abuse the fox in this way, no doubt because of all the fowls it has carried away:

Per he watȝ þreted and ofte þef called (1725)

“there he was threatened and oft thief was he called”

But though nobody ventures to use the word in relation with Gawain, it is just as true of him. By retaining the girdle which should by covenant have been given to Bertilak, he becomes guilty of little less than theft. As Bertilak puts it:

‘Trwe mon trwe restore’ (2354)

“The true shall truly repay”

and Gawain has failed to repay. There is an implication of theft in Bertilak's words when he points to the girdle and says:

⁷ The validity of Gawain's confession has been much discussed. J. A. Burrow, in “The Two Confession Scenes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*”, *Modern Philology*, 57 (1959), 73-79, and *A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (London, 1965), considers it invalid, as does N. Jacobs too (“Gawain's False Confession”, *English Studies*, 51 (1970), 433-35. R. H. Green (“Gawain's Shield and the Quest for Perfection”, *English Literary History*, 29 (1962), 121-39) suggests that Gawain's conscience was “muddled” and that he did not acknowledge his sin even to himself. For G. Morgan (“The Validity of Gawain's Confession in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*”, *Review of English Studies*, 36 (1985), 1-18) the confession was valid since Gawain was unaware of his fault. Other scholars have maintained that Gawain's fault was slight and did not have to be confessed (W. O. Evans, “The Case for Sir Gawain Re-Opened”, *Modern Language Review*, 68 (1973), 721-33; M. Foley, “Gawain's Two Confessions Reconsidered”, *Chaucer Review*, 9 (1974-75), 73-79; T. Hunt, “Gawain's Fault and the Moral Perspectives of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*”, *Trivium*, 10 (1975), 1-18; Setsuko Nakao, “Sir Gawain's Confession Reconsidered – a Catholic View”, *Studies in English Literature*, 52 (1976), p. 3-25; T. D. Hill, “Gawain's Jestling Lie: Towards an Interpretation of the Confessional Scene in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*”, *Studia Neophilologica*, 52 (1980), 279-86.)

'...hit is *my*⁸ wede þat þou wereȝ, þat ilke wouen girdel' (2358)

"it is my weed that thou wearest, that very woven girdle"

At this point Gawain becomes aware of his theft and gives the girdle back (2376-77), and only wears it again when it is formally given to him by Bertilak (2395):

'For your gordel' (note the possessive!), quop Gawayn, 'God yow forȝelde!
þat wyl I welde wyth guod wylle' (2429-30)

"But for your girdle,' quoth Gawain, 'may God you repay!
That I will gain with good will'"

Of the three animals hunted by Bertilak, it is, shamefully enough, the fox that Gawain resembles most in his manner to avoid death. Gawain refuses to flee from the Green Knight as Bertilak's servant advises him to do, and in this he does not resemble the hinds and does; he does not fight back as does the boar, since his oath forbids it⁹. But he does not surrender to his fate either, he tries to escape it by a trick, as the fox did.

The fox's ultimate effort to avoid the sword :

And he schunt for þe scharp, and schulde haf arered (1902)

"and he blenched at the blade, and would have backed if he could"

parallels Gawain's shrinking under the axe, of which Gawain himself says:

'I schunt oneȝ' (2280)

"I blenched once"

And the skin wound which the Green Knight inflicts on Gawain as a punishment of his one lapse is anticipated by the flaying of the fox (1920-21).

The relation between the fox's wiles and Gawain's slip on the third day is generally agreed upon; opinions differ concerning the other two hunts. Difficulties arise from any attempt to extend the interpretation applied to the fox to the other two animals. For instance Savage¹⁰ relates Gawain's behaviour on the three days to that of the three animals. It is clear that on the third day Gawain is as wily as a fox; and up to a certain point it can be admitted that on the first day he acts with the caution of a stag; but his behaviour on the second day is not radically different from that of the first day, and though there may be a little more directness, it cannot compare with the boar's brutality.

One difficulty in considering all three animals to represent the same character is that all three are killed in the hunting scenes, whereas on the first two days Gawain has the upper hand in the contest. Logically, if the fox of the third day is Gawain as he slips, the hinds and does and the boar must represent those who are defeated in the first two bedroom scenes: the lady, her husband, under whose direction she acted, and Morgan le Fay, the instigator of the whole plot.

⁸ My emphasis.

⁹ M. Ingham and L. Barkley ("Further Animal Parallels in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*", *Chaucer Review*, 13 (1978-79), 384-86) find a parallel between Gawain and the boar in the way both stand fast when attacked – but though Gawain does stand fast in front of the Green Knight, he does not try to defend himself.

¹⁰ "The Significance of the Hunting Scenes", p. 8-13.

The description of the boar – huge, old and terrible – recalls that of the Green Knight.

The Green Knight is remarkable for his size (*on þe most on þe molde on mesure hyghe* “the mightiest on middle-earth in measure of height”, 137; *half etayn* “half a troll”, 140; *a hoge hazel* “very large and long”, 844, as Bertilak), and his terrible aspect (*an aghlich mayster* “a perilous horseman”, 136; *sturne, stif on þe strybbe on stalworth schonkez, / Felle face as þe fyre* “stern, strong in his stance upon stalwart legs, / his face fell as fire”, 846-47, as Bertilak). His age is emphasized. He calls Arthur and his knights beardless children (280), and as Bertilak he is described as *of hyghe eldee* (844). The exact meaning of this phrase has been established by Suzuki¹¹ as “old, advanced in years”. There can be no doubt that Bertilak is advanced in years, since he is later referred to as *þe olde lorde of þat leude* “the old governor of that hall” (1125). However, he cannot be positively decrepit, or his beard would be white instead of beaver-hued (845).

All this is to be found in the description of the boar. It is a huge animal; it is old, but age brings it increase of strength rather than decay; and it is dreadful to look at:

On þe sellokest swyn swenged out þere,
Long sythen fro þe sounder sized for olde,
For he watȝ breme, bor alþer-grattest,
Ful grymme quen he groyned (1439-43)

“Twas a boar without rival that burst out upon them;
long the herd he had left, that lone beast aged,
for savage was he, of all swine the hugest,
grim indeed when he grunted”

The solitary habits of the boar, which stays away from its kind (*fro þe sounder*, 1440), are those of the Green Knight himself, who lives alone at the Green Chapel, at least according to the account given by Bertilak’s servant (2098, 2114-15). It is true in a way of Bertilak too, since his castle is isolated in the middle of a forest on the flank of a mountain. The boar’s pugnaciousness and violent resistance are in keeping with the rough appearance of the Green Knight. The partial invulnerability which it owes to its thick skin gives it a likeness to a knight in full armour (1454-59). It is so formidable an adversary that the bravest at times draw back (1567): this hints at Gawain’s momentary flinching from the Green Knight.

The parallel between the boar and the Green Knight does not end there. When the boar is at last killed, its head is cut off and carried before Bertilak on the way back to the castle (1616), a clear echo of the way the Green Knight carried his own head before him when he left Arthur’s court¹².

If the fox killed on the third day symbolizes Gawain, and the boar killed on the second day is his host, Bertilak, whose designs he has frustrated through his

¹¹ E. Suzuki, “A Note on the Age of the Green Knight”, *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 78 (1977), 27-30.

¹² Speirs (“Sir Gawain and the Green Knight”) hints at a relation between the cut heads of the Green Knight, Gawain and the boar; but Gawain’s head was not cut off, and the similarity operates only between the Green Knight and the boar.

constancy, the defeated enemy of the first day, represented by the hinds and does, must be the two women, Bertilak's wife and Morgan le Fay, who are associated with the Green Knight in the plot against Gawain.

The poet makes it clear that the animals killed on the first day are exclusively female:

Pay let þe herttez haf þe gate, with þe hyȝe hedes,
 Þe breme bukkez also with hor brode paumeȝ;
 For þe fre lorde hade defende in fermysoun tyme
 Þat þer schulde no mon meue to þe male dere. (1154-57)¹³

"They let the harts go past with their high antlers,
 and the brave bucks also with their branching palms;
 for the lord of the castle had decreed in the close season
 that no man should molest the male of the deer."

Be it only for this reason, the hinds and does can hardly symbolize Gawain, and must represent the two women in the castle.

In front of danger, the hinds and does have the attitude expected of women according to medieval standards: they tremble at the very first sound, before the enemy can even be seen, and immediately flee in terror (1150-52). This is to be contrasted with the typically "male" attitude of the boar which waits for the dogs to come close and charges at them, and then again and again in its flight turns back against its pursuers and wounds many a dog and hunter before finally succumbing.

This is the only one of Bertilak's three hunts in which several animals are killed, and they belong to two species¹⁴. This corresponds to the duplication of the female figure into Morgan le Fay and Bertilak's wife.

The landscape of the three hunts is in harmony, not only with the animals hunted, but also with the character of the men or women they represent.

The landscape of the fox hunt is remarkable for its tame, commonplace, civilised aspect: woods, thickets, hedges and ditches:

And he trantes and tornayeeȝ þurȝ many tene greue,
 Haulouneȝ, and herkeneȝ bi heggeȝ ful ofte.
 At þe last bi a littel dich he lepeȝ ouer a spenne,
 Steleȝ out ful stilly bi a strothe rande (1707-10)

"He dodges and ever doubles through many a dense coppice,
 and looping oft he lurks and listens under fences.
 At last at a little ditch he leaps o'er a thorn-hedge,
 sneaks out secretly by the side of a thicket"

There is nothing frightening, nothing grandiose there. The fences, ditch and hedge even imply the hand of man. Indeed the fox, accused of theft by the hunters because of the fowls it eats, cannot live far from human settlements. The only touch of wild

¹³ Tolkien and Gordon (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, p. 107) point out that the closed season of the harts and bucks was from September 14 to June 24, and that during this period hinds and does could be hunted from September 14 to February 2.

¹⁴ See W. J. Ong, "The Green Knight's Harts and Bucks", *Modern Language Notes*, 65 (1950), 136-39, who draws attention to the distinction between these two species.

nature, an allusion to rocks, is brought in by a comparison of the voice of the hounds—Bertilak's hounds—with crashing rocks:

Suche a sorȝe at þat syȝt þay sette on his hede
As alle þe clamberande clyffes hade clatered on hepes (1721-22)

“Such a curse at the view they called down on him
that the clustering cliffs might have clattered in ruin”

This nature tamed by the hand of man is a fitting representation of the court of King Arthur as a centre of civilisation.

The hunting of the hinds and does takes place in dales, and though they try to flee to the hills, the hunters head them back:

Der drof in þe dale, doted for drede,
Hiȝed to þe hyȝe, bot heterly þay were
Restayed with þe stablye, þat stoutly ascryed. (...)
þe hindeȝ were halden in with hay! and war!
þe does dryuen with gret dyn to þe depe sladeȝ (1151-59)

“deer dashed through the dale by dread bewildered,
and hastened to the heights, but they hotly were greeted,
and turned back by the beaters, who boldly shouted. (...)
The hinds were held back with hey! and ware!,
the does driven with great din to the deep valleys”

Their living in low-lying places and their inability to reach the heights symbolize feminine weakness and gentleness.

The boar's lair is a wild place, among cliffs and boulders. The rocks heard in the voices of Bertilak's hounds during the fox hunt are here part of the actual landscape:

Bitwene a flosche in þat fryth and a foo cragge;
In a knot bi a clyffe, at þe kerre syde,
Per as þe rogh rocher vnrydely watȝ fallen (1430-32)

“between a fen-pool in that forest and a frowning crag.
In a tangle under a tall cliff at the tarn's edges,
where the rough rock ruggedly in ruin was fallen”

The wildness of the surroundings announces the Green Chapel, where stone is again the main element of the landscape:

Bot hyȝe bonkkeȝ and brent vpon bope halue,
And ruȝe knokled knarreȝ with knorned stoneȝ (2165-66).

“only high hillsides sheer upon either hand,
and notched knuckled crags with gnarled boulders”

Indeed Bertilak's castle itself, though no rocks are mentioned, is scarcely set in less unpleasant surroundings:

...a forest ful dep, þat ferly watȝ wylde,
Hiȝe hilleȝ on vche a halue, and holtwodeȝ vnder
Of hore okeȝ ful hoge a hundreth togeder;
þe hasel and þe haȝborne were harled al samen,
With roȝe raged mosse rayled aywhere,
With mony bryddeȝ vnblyþe upon bare twyges,
þat pitosly þer piped for pyne of þe colde. (741-47)

“a forest that was deep and fearsomely wild,
with high hills at each hand, and hoar woods beneath
of huge aged oaks by the hundred together;
the hazel and the hawthorn were huddled and tangled
with rough ragged moss around them trailing,
with many birds bleakly on the bare twigs sitting
that piteously piped there for pain of the cold.”

The name “Hautdesert” can be translated as “high waste land”—though this is only one of its possible meanings¹⁵—, and this fits the type of landscape associated with the Green Knight.

The landscape complements the characterization introduced by the animals’ nature and behaviour, and shows the hinds and does—and the ladies—as gentle and weak; the boar—and the Green Knight—as wild, untamed; and the fox—Gawain—as a product of civilisation.

From the correspondence of each character to an animal can be derived an indication as to their relative worth.

The hinds and does and the boar are carved according to a complicated ritual¹⁶ detailed in the poem (in respectively 36 and 10 lines), the fox is flayed with little ceremony in two short lines. On the first two days the flesh of the animals is taken back to the castle, and the parts of lesser value (the entrails, for instance) given to the dogs as a reward. On the third day the flesh of the fox is discarded as worthless, and the dogs get their reward before the flaying, which makes it clear that they are not given any of the meat (1918-21). When Bertilak displays his game after the day’s hunting, Gawain admires the hinds and does and their *schyree grece* “shining fat” (1378) and exclaims:

‘Ȝe iwysse (...), here is wayth fayrest
pat I seȝ þis seuen ȝere in sesoun of winter.’ (1381-82)

“‘Yea verily,’ the other averred, ‘here is venison the fairest
that I’ve seen in seven years in the season of winter!’”

He also expresses wonder at both the flesh and the head of the boar (1629-34). The fox skin he does not praise, and to his host’s apologies for the meanness of the gift he can answer nothing but:

‘Inoȝ, (...) / I þonk yow’ (1948-49)

“‘Tis enough,’ (...) / ‘I thank you’”

The fox is worthless as food, even for dogs—of worse value than the entrails of hinds, does or boar—and can elicit no praise as a hunting trophy. As Savage points

¹⁵ See W. Branford, “Bercilak de Hautdesert: An Interrogation of the Green Knight”, *English Studies in Africa*, 7 (1964), 54-64, and Andrew Breeze, “The Gawain-Poet and Hautdesert”, *Leeds Studies in English*, 38 (2007), 135-41.

¹⁶ See Trevor Dodmans, “Hunting to Teach: Class, Pedagogy, and Maleness in *The Master of Game and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*”, *Exemplaria*, 17 (2005), 413-44, and Ad Putter, “The Ways and Words of the Hunt: Notes on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Master of the Game*, *Sir Tristrem*, *Pearl*, and *Saint Erkenwald*”, *Chaucer Review*, 40 (2006), 354-85.

out, in the Middle Ages it was regarded as “vermin to be hunted out and destroyed”¹⁷. And this is a symbol of Gawain!

Does this mean that Gawain is really as abject as he feels when his fault is revealed to him and that he confesses :

‘I biknowe yow, knyȝt, here styllle,
Al fawty is my fare’ (2385-86)?

“I confess, sir, here to you
all faulty has been my fare”

The game of the exchange of winnings gives us a more accurate insight into the real worth of the characters. If we accept that the items exchanged are of equal value and kisses used as a currency unit, on the first day the lady’s kiss is equivalent in value to the many hinds and does killed by Bertilak. The second day, the value of the gifts increases on both sides: Gawain has two kisses to give, but the boar, a more dangerous adversary than the hinds and does, representing the lord, the master of the castle, is worth twice as much. If parity is still respected on the third day, Gawain the fox is taxed at three kisses. In other words, in spite of his one lapse, he is still worth as much as all the other characters taken together.

The use of animal symbolism enables the poet both to draw attention to Gawain’s fault when he represents him as a fox, and also, through the tariff established by the exchange of winnings, to suggest that this fault is a slight blemish which scarcely lessens his merit. The true appraisal of Gawain’s excellence is given by the Green Knight as he bestows both praise and blame on his conduct after the mock-beheading :

‘As perle bi þe quite pese is of prys more,
So is Gawayn, in god fayth, bi oþer gay knyȝteȝ’. (2364-65)

“As a pearl than white pease is prized more highly,
so is Gawain, in good faith, than other gallant knights.”

¹⁷ “The Significance of the Hunting Scenes”, p. 3.