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Abstract

Applies Tolkien's theories of the artist as a sub-creator and of the artist's creation as a secondary world to the Middle English alliterative poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Additional Keywords

Morgan le Fey; Sir Gawain and the Green Knight; Sub-creation; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Theory of sub-creation

Meeting Morgan le Fay: J. R. R. Tolkien's Theory of Subcreation and the Secondary World of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

C. M. Adderley

IF the reactions of my students are at all typical, my first response to reading *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a fairly common one. Although I found the poem immensely gratifying, and was astonished by the sophisticated way in which the exchange of winnings, the attempted seduction, and the beheading game were interdependent, I was still dissatisfied with the ending, particularly the abrupt way in which the poet introduces Morgan le Fay. Many commentators, of course, share this dissatisfaction. "The difficulty," Larry D. Benson writes, for example, "is that Morgan appears too late in the action, and Guenevere's role is too slight to justify the importance she suddenly assumes at the end of the adventure" (33). Her plan to frighten Guenever to death seems, as Benson adds, "imposed upon the fabric of the poem" without being an organic part of it (213). J. R. Hulbert reasons that if Morgan is an enchantress, she must have known that Gawain would pass her test; so, he asks, why does she bother? Bertilak's explanation is "one that seems to be sensible superficially but is inherently unreasonable" (454). In his landmark study, J. A. Burrow wrote that Morgan was "a dumping-ground for all the suspicions and resentments we have stored up on Gawain's behalf in the course of his adventure" (64). Denton Fox threw his lot in with Burrow and Hulbert in 1968, when he wrote that "there is no reason to suspect that Morgain, notoriously a malign enchantress who is hostile to Arthur and his knights, is anything else than a character added by the poet to motivate the plot and to clear Bercilak of any guilt" (7), and Albert B. Friedman recorded that the poet "fails to convince us Morgan is organic to the poem" (158). This is all very well, of course, but I think that the real solution is somewhat more sophisticated than arguing that the poet got it wrong. Great poets do not waste words. Neither Shakespeare nor Chaucer create characters merely to "motivate the plot" as a kind of straw man, a sponge for the reader's resentment. There is no reason that the reader's resentment could not have been directed towards Bertilak, circumventing the

poet's need for Morgan, if she were nothing but a plot device; but she probably is more than that. Nevertheless, the effect upon the reader is jarring. The rest of the narrative is smooth, and the poet's introduction of Morgan at this point seems like the literary equivalent of hitting a speed-bump at 50 MPH.[1]

It is where a poem becomes unclear that we have possibly the greatest opportunity of discovering meaning; and I would argue that this is the case with Morgan le Fay. The feeling of disconnectedness occasioned by her abrupt appearance is exactly what the poet wanted us to feel, and is an integral part of the poem's juxtaposition of reality and literature. Camelot represents reality, Hautdesert the fictional world, the world in which reality operates like literature. "When Gawain rides away from Arthur's court," writes John Eadie, "he is leaving behind the historical world where all moral choices are only potentially good or bad, and going to an enclosed world where the consequences of one's moral choices are almost immediately apparent" ("Morgain" 301). This is one of the fundamental functions of literature: to set up a world in many ways similar to the real world but different in that it operates more smoothly, more obviously in accord with justice.

This is where J. R. R. Tolkien's 1938 lecture, "On Fairy Stories," can be useful. Unlike most theorists, Tolkien describes the literary art from within. He describes how fantasy stories are forged by bringing together familiar elements in unfamiliar ways. When these elements are combined, "new form is made: Faërie begins; Man becomes a sub-creator" (49). Authors of fantasy stories are no mere storytellers, then. They are sub-creators, responsible for fashioning worlds in which their stories can take place. Such an author "makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is 'true:' it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside" (60). Tolkien takes Samuel Taylor Coleridge to task for having advocated a "willing suspension of disbelief;" if an author is sub-creating the secondary world effectively, belief will occur and no act of suspension is needed. This belief is what Tolkien terms "Secondary Belief" (61).

Subcreation is not restricted, however, to physical details like geography and armour. As we know from Tolkien's works of fantasy, effective subcreation also embraces the psychology of the characters as well as their moral, spiritual and religious values, and of the cultures in the story. More importantly, there are rules dictating the very structure of story, rules which appeal to the basic human need to have things work out right, what Tolkien calls eucatastrophe:

The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending [. . .] is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief. ("On Fairy-Stories" 86)

In fantasy, this means that there is a kind of moral order, rules about the way the story should turn out. We would feel cheated if one of the Ugly Stepsisters married the Prince.

Now this is clearly what is happening for the majority of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Things do not necessarily happen in the same way that they happen in the primary world—our world. But they do happen consistently, according to the rules of Arthurian romance. Thus, at Camelot, Gawain receives an appropriate magical challenge; on his way to the Green Chapel he encounters the fitting foes; and, once in Hautdesert, he encounters (as is proper only in medieval romance) a genial host and a woman who falls in love with him. This is what we are all familiar with; this is reassuring; this is as it should be.

But Tolkien adds a warning to his formula for sub-creation. "The moment disbelief arises," he writes, "the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside" (60). To prevent the failure of secondary belief, most authors try to hide the fact that they are sub-creating a fictional world, so that we are never aware that we are reading something that is deliberately constructed. One result of this is that readers identify with the characters and, once they have become thus absorbed in the sub-created world, the author can manipulate them at will. Realisation that one has been manipulated normally comes at the end of a story, when one puts it aside. At last, one recognises the secondary world as an authorial construct, and realises that one has been manipulated. But this recognition has far-reaching consequences. Sensitive readers recognise not only that the characters have been manipulated, but that they, the readers, having been manipulated through the secondary world, may be manipulated in the primary world as well. This technique allows readers to understand that the real world is, in effect, sub-created by the ultimate author, God. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, this realisation is effected through the medium of Morgan le Fay.

I hope that here an apparent digression may be allowed. If secondary belief is achieved in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, it is because we identify with Gawain; but with what in Gawain do we empathise? For one thing, Gawain is like us all in so far as he believes himself to be pretty much clear of serious sin; he is, by his own estimation, a perfect Christian knight. Whatever the faults of Arthur's court, it is the centre of courtesy, and Gawain is not merely its best knight, but its perfect knight. He embodies courtesy. In this sense, he is entirely the opposite of the Green Knight, whose abrupt and scornful behaviour is, to say the least, insulting. The Green Knight pointedly ignores Arthur, who is certainly sitting very prominently on the "he3e dece." The responses of Arthur and Gawain to this rude challenge, however, are models of courteous self-restraint, and this places the conflict on a much higher level. Rather than an individual game played between Gawain and the Green Knight, it becomes the conflict between civility and incivility. Civilisation, Camelot, the New Troy, oppose incivility, wilderness and the Green Chapel.

Gawain, furthermore, seems very humble and courageous. He politely does not demand that the quest be his until it is clear that the king will be disgraced otherwise. He does not appear to have any inflated opinion of his own prowess. Not until the reputation of the court is brought into question does anybody act at all:

> "What, is þis Arþures hous," quod þe haþel þenne,
> "Þat al þe rous rennes of þur3 ryalmes so mony?
> Where is now your sourquydrye and your conquestes,
> Your gryndel-layk, and your greme, and your grete wordes?
> Now is þe reuel and þe renoun of þe rounde table
> Ouer-walt wyth a worde of on wy3es speche;
> For al dares for drede, with-oute dynt schewed!" (lines 309-15)

Even then, Gawain does not ask for the adventure until Arthur attempts it, and does so at risk of his own life. Nobody else offers to accept the Green Knight's challenge, because "fele sellyez had þay sen, bot such neuer are, / For-þi for fantoum and fayry3e þe folk þere hit demed" (ll. 239-40). The other knights know that this is an enchantment, and they refuse the challenge; Gawain accepts it, knowing that he cannot allow Arthur to lose his life, but knowing with the rest that he might just lose his own.

Gawain's seeming humility is expressed in his declaration that he is "þe wakkest" knight, and "of wyt feblest" (line 354), and his assertion that the only praise due to him is "for as much as 3e [Arthur] ar myn em" (l. 356). We have no reason, at this point, to think him insincere in his self-estimation. Burrow notes that Gawain's entrance into the poem is very low-key, and he suggests that this is meant to imply that he is an average, rather than exemplary member of the Round Table fellowship (5-6). I would suggest that the low-key entrance is supposed to emphasise, rather, the humility of the hero. This is a point of view with which Tolkien, at least, concurs:

> Gawain's motive is not pride in his own prowess, not boastfulness, not even the light-hearted frivolity of knights making absurd bets and vows in the midst of the Christmas revels. His motive is a humble one: the protection of Arthur, his elder kinsman, of his king, of the head of the Round Table, from indignity and peril, and the risking instead of himself, the least of the knights (as he declares), and the one whose loss could most easily be endured. ("Sir Gawain" 75)

The only adjective that has so far been applied to Gawain is "gode" (l. 109) and, in fact, this is the sum of the poet's description of him up to this point. There can be little doubt, then, that the poet intended a portrait of a pretty good (if not perfect) knight so far in his portrayal of Gawain.

The poet emphasises Gawain's fidelity to *trawþe* by his departure from the safety of Camelot to meet the Green Knight in spite of the fact that, so far as he is concerned (since he does not know yet that he is the hero of a fantasy), he is riding to his certain death. In Fitt Four, on the final stage of his journey, his guide even provides him with an easy way of forsaking his oath. Naturally, he refuses. These manifold virtues are summed up in the highly suggestive symbol of the pentangle, the charge Gawain bears upon his shield, and given the lengths the poet goes to describe this device—again, without any hint of irony yet—it is hard see him as anything but "fautlez" (l. 640). Yet here, we begin to suspect our hero's motives. If the pentangle really does symbolise everything the poet says it does, then Gawain is already a little lacking in humility simply by choosing it. Would a truly humble knight really choose an armorial bearing that trumpets his virtues so large?[2]

It is during the journey to Hautdesert, I believe, that readers begin to "forget" that they are reading a fantasy. Following Gawain through the wilderness, the poet gives us so few details that we cannot truly identify with the hero, but

when the clouds break upon his head, the familiarity of the situation enables us to start to experience his misery; we have entered the secondary world. Gawain prays to the Blessed Virgin for a safe harbour, and he instantly sees a castle between the trees. Ad Putter points out the highly subjective way in which this passage is written. Drawing a comparison between the *Gawain*-poet and Chrétien de Troyes, he demonstrates that Hautdesert is described consistently from Gawain's point of view, a technique which "appears not only from the verbs which describe the act of seeing . . . but also from the kinds of details which they make available. What we register is made dependent on the relative position of the protagonists whose movements we follow" (36). We experience the "appearance" of Hautdesert as Gawain experiences it, and from this point on we see everything from his point of view. When he is fooled by the Lady of the Castle, we too are fooled by her.

Gawain's sojourn at Hautdesert, however, serves primarily to deflect him from the true aim of his quest. The poem is, in fact, a series of deflections or deceptions, the first of which concerns the very nature of the test to which he is subjected. Bertilak proposes the Exchange of Winnings, and Gawain cleverly identifies the kisses he receives from the hostess as a part of that game. This proximity of the temptation scenes and the Exchange of Winnings should once more clue Gawain in to the true nature of the test. He really ought to guess that fidelity to his host is what is being tested here. Once again, he is deflected from guessing the truth. The hostess achieves this by dressing her temptations up as a test of courtesy. This is implicit throughout the first temptation scene, in which she attempts to exploit his pride and fails; finally, she makes a demand on his courtesy, and succeeds:

> So god as Gawayn gaynly is halden,
> And cortaysye is closed so clene in hym-seluen,
> Couth not ly3tly haf lenged so long wyth a lady,
> Bot he had craued a cosse, bi his courtaysye,
> Bi sum towch of summe tryfle, at sum talez ende. (ll. 1297-1301)

Gawain assents to the kiss because courtesy demands it, because he must do "as a kny3t fallez" (l. 1303), and this assent marks his conscious recognition of courtesy as the virtue being tested here. This successfully deflects his attention away from his fidelity to Bertilak, his *trawpe*, which is in reality being tested.

The Lady plays on Gawain's sense of achievement next. Having resisted seduction for three days, he must surely breathe a sigh of relief when she offers to leave, and it is this relief that allows her to subvert his expectations one more time. She switches from apparent adversary to apparent protector by offering him the green girdle that will presumably protect him against the Green Knight's blows. "And the reader colludes in Gawain's wishful thinking," Putter observes. He adds:

Rationally, we know perfectly well that girdles are not magical talismans, but fancying ourselves to be in the fantastic world of romance where such magical love-gifts abound, we, like Gawain, overlay our knowledge of the way things are with the belief that we are in a romance where things can be different. (144)

Still, at this point, reader and protagonist are one, both deceived by the Hostess, both counting on the girdle for the successful resolution of the narrative, both entirely in the hands of the poet.

This mutual duping continues into Fitt Four, since the reader and Gawain believe that his test at the Green Chapel is to be a test of bravery, a fiction established early in the poem, before Gawain leaves Camelot. The Green Knight says Gawain will "recreaunt be calde" if he does not keep the covenant at the Green Chapel (l. 456), but other than that, the Green Knight's words are entirely concerned with keeping *trawþe*. He tells Gawain that they must "Refourme [. . .] oure for-wardes" before proceeding to their business, words that are "ful trwe" (ll. 378, 392). The Green Knight asks that Gawain repeat the "couenant [. . .] bi þi trawþe," and urges him to keep their "forwardez" (ll. 393-94, 409). Gawain, in his turn, agrees, "Gladly sir, for soþe" (l. 415). After the blow has been struck, the apparition continues his harping upon *trawþe*, urging Gawain to "be grayþe to go as þou hettez" and to find his way to the Green Chapel "lelly [. . .] / As þou hatz hette" (ll. 448, 449-50). "I charge þe," he says, to emphasize the importance of keeping this particular covenant: "faylez þou neuer" (ll. 451, 455). The emphasis is overwhelmingly on keeping *trawþe*, and yet the Green Knight's words apparently make no impression on Gawain, whose chief concern about the guide's suggestion that he shirk his appointment is that he would be considered "a knyƷt kowarde" if he took his advice (l. 2131). Furthermore, he believes the test to be over—and that he has succeeded—when the Green Knight physically scratches the skin of his neck at the Green Chapel. If the Green Knight attempts to assail him

further, "I redyly schal quyte" (l. 2324), he says. Gawain presumably persists in thinking the test to be simply one of courage because that is the most obvious solution. In all of the analogues of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the beheading match is indeed a test of the hero's bravery. It is the most obvious solution. His fear is for his physical life, and the Hostess knows this when she offers him the green girdle: "While he hit hade hemely halched aboute, / Þer is no haþel vnder heuen to-hewe hym þat my3t; / For he my3t not be slayn, for sly3t vpon erþe" (ll. 1852-54).

Each member of Hautdesert deceives Gawain, and deflects his attention from the true nature of his quest. The hostess does so with regard to the temptations to which he is subjected during his sojourn, and both the guide and Bertilak (in the guise of the Green Knight) do the same with regard to the beheading match. The common denominator, Bertilak announces, is Morgan le Fay, and to Gawain, she must certainly look like the chief means of his failure. Through her agents, she has utterly deceived him, for the final deflection is that which made him believe the temptations, the Exchange of Winnings, and the Beheading Match to be separate tests. When he recognises their connectedness, Gawain realises how utterly he has failed. Morgan here is a kind of subcreator, subtly and invisibly controlling those around her, guiding them, in spite of their free will, towards an end for which she has predestined them.

Edith Williams argues that, when Gawain accepts the Green Girdle, "a primal instinct had been called into play, and as an aspect of Gawain's affirmation of life his action is commendable rather than otherwise" (51), then adds that "by his painful confrontation with human frailty (accepting the lace, flinching at the first blow), he has discovered himself to be fully a member of the human race" (54). Again, this assertion is built upon tricky foundations. It assumes, in the first place, that the judgements of Bertilak (a shape-shifter who has deceived and tricked Gawain) and Camelot (a rather frivolous court—perhaps we might even call it "a silly place") are right, and that Gawain's assessment of himself is wrong. The second assertion ignores the fact that Gawain has set his sight upon something higher than the human race. His fidelity is to Mary and her Son, and he is grieved to discover that he has been faithless. If Williams were truly right in her argument, Gawain would almost certainly have been well satisfied with his conduct, but hearing that Morgan has engineered a test that he did not even realise was a test forces him

to understand that he has fallen from perfection or, conversely, that he never really was perfect, but simply believed he was. In trusting the Green Girdle instead of the power of God, he has abandoned the faith that made him—at least in his own eyes—perfect. Perfection minus anything (however small) is an absolute loss. What was once perfect can never be so again. Gawain's loss is total. "When he left Camelot," Eadie points out, "he was 'fautleȝ,' absolutely. He was perfect, without a blemish. Now, he is merely relatively better than everyone else" ("Sir Gawain" 64). And it is Morgan le Fay who has caused this, or at least who has created a situation in which Gawain has allowed himself to drop his guard.

But it gets worse, for as Gawain soon learns, error begets error. His first error had been accepting the Green Girdle rather than trusting God; his second had been his refusal to turn it over to Bertilak; his third is the lack of courtesy in his speech on evil women, which is a kind of knee-jerk reaction to having been caught in error. Courtesy forbids him to blame either Bertilak or his relatives for his own failure, and pride forbids him to blame himself. He lapses into a misogynistic tirade that has its ultimate origins in St. Jerome's *Adversus Jovinianum*, a safe medieval attitude to adopt; but, ironically, in doing so he deserts the chivalric courtesy towards women necessary to his role as a knight. The last deflection is this: that his first reaction to failure creates yet another failure, the desertion of courtesy, the virtue he had championed all along.

Gawain's realisation that he has been the victim of manipulation from "back-stage," as it were, forces us to perceive the fictional world through which Gawain has been moving all this time. As with my students, most readers' initial response to this staggering revelation is to wonder what on earth Morgan le Fay could be doing in the poem. We have had no indication of her presence so far, and it seems inartistic to introduce her here without more preparation. This inevitably leads to the second response: why would the poet, whose skill we have come to respect, do something so obviously miscalculated? In two steps, we have emerged from the poem and into the real world, since we are now thinking not of Gawain, but of the poet. We are now in a position to appreciate the structure of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and to see how it follows a distinct pattern replicated elsewhere in literature. The journey of the reader and of Gawain are parallel. Just as Gawain leaves the real world— Camelot—to enter a fictional world—Hautdesert—so the readers leave their real world—the armchair beside the fire, the library, the classroom—to enter

a fictional world—the sub-created world of the poem. While we dwell in this fictional world, the poet plays a number of tricks upon us, leading us to expect one thing (usually something dictated by the traditions of medieval romance) and delivering something else; in the same way, Gawain is deceived by other characters, receiving what he least expects. We identify with Gawain because our experiences and Gawain's are the same in this respect. When Gawain recognises the fact that he has erred in a fictional world, so do we, popping out of the poem to understand our shortcomings in the real world. Reactions to this realisation may differ—few readers today, and possibly few in the Middle Ages, would favour Gawain's professed misogyny; but even this helps us to live real life. Gawain has been deceived by others; now he tries to deceive himself. Error begets error. We can look at Gawain and beware the effect that this juxtaposition between reality and fiction can have.

When Gawain returns to Camelot, he is essentially alone, for no one else understands the profound change that has been wrought upon him. Like Plato's Philosopher King, he must tell others what he has learned, but it is ineffable. It has to be experienced to be understood. Likewise, we return to our real world—our families, our colleagues—alone, separated from the mortal world by our experience. Gawain's conclusion—that in order to be good at all, we must be good in an absolute sense, and that any reduction in goodness, however apparently minor, transforms perfection to imperfection—can now be seen as our own conclusion as well. Our task is not so hard as Gawain's, for we can pass the poem on to other readers: it is so constructed that the same effect will in all likelihood be achieved. For a moment, by the intercession of Morgan le Fay, the fictional and actual worlds meet, and both protagonist and reader come away with a sense that life has been utterly and permanently changed.

Notes

[1]If we had been paying attention, of course, we would have known that Morgan would be important. When we are first introduced to the two ladies of Hautdesert, the poet devotes only six lines to describing the hostess (ll. 941-46) but twenty-three to describing the "auncian" (ll. 947-69). We ought to notice the older lady more than the younger; except that we don't. So powerful is the tradition in which the poet is working—the tradition that places the beautiful damsel at the centre of the story—that the reader's attention is almost always diverted from Morgan to the hostess who is, after all, by far the more desirable creature. On a first reading, we may even miss the fact that "Þe olde auncian wyf heȝest ho syttez" (1001).

²Tolkien also notes this moral ambiguity surrounding the pentangle. Noting that the charge was "imposed there by our poet," he adds: "the reasons that he gives for the use of it are in themselves and in the style of their enumeration such as Sir Gawain himself could not possibly have had, still less openly asserted, for the adoption of his charge" ("Sir Gawain" 77). Tolkien presumably refers to the inappropriateness of Gawain's boasting of his own perfection through the pentangle, a reading that largely coincides with my own.

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