Lecture 3: Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

SITHEN the sege and the assaut was sesed at Troye,
The borgh brittened and brent to brondes and askes, destroyed
The tulk that the trammes of tresoun ther wroght plots
Was tried for his tricherie, the trewest on erthe: truest?
Hit was Ennias the athel, and his highe kynde, noble kin
That sithen depreced prouinces, and patrounes bicomence conquered princes [over]
Welneghe of al the wele in the west iles. nearly wealth
Fro riche Romulus to Rome ricchis hym swythe, When noble Romulus to Rome makes way swiftly
With gret bobbaunce that burghe he biges vpon fyrst, pride builds
And neuenes hit his aune nome, as hit now hat; names own has
Tirius to Tuskan and teldes bigynnes, dwellings builds
Langaberde in Lumbardie lyftes vp homes,
And fer ouer the French flod Felix Brutus
Happy B. [Albion]
On mony *bonkkes* ful brode Bretayn he settes  
*slopes*  
wyth *wynne*,  
*joy*  
Where werre and wrake and wonder  
*BOB*  
Bi *sythes* has *wont* therinne,  
*turns*  
lived  
And oft bothe blysse and blunder  
Ful *skete* has *skyfted synne*.  
*often*  
*shifted*  
since  

(A161-62:1-19)

LANGUAGE: Middle English, like Chaucer’s.  
*SG&GK* is much harder for us, feels much “older,” even though contemporary with Chaucer. WHY?  
Chaucer spoke/wrote the dominant **dialect**, so we can still understand him with a little effort. Gawain poet (anon.) spoke a rustic dialect (Northwest midland).

ALSO POETIC STYLE: Archaic, like the old alliterative meter in Beowulf, but with a modernizing twist. Dynamic tension between alliteration and rhyme.
This stylistic & microcosmic tension is reflected also, thematically, in the structure of the poem as a whole.

HOW?

3 Ways of looking at structural/thematic question, by observing tensions between
1. Old (Celtic) Folklore
   and New (French) Romance (of Chivalry)
2. Nature and Culture/Civilization/Art
3. Pagan and Christian

What are some of the folkloric elements in the poem? What is natural and what is artificial? To which world does the Green Knight belong? What are some of the pagan elements in the poem? What are some of the Christian elements in the poem?

So who is that Jolly Green Giant anyway?
(1) A creature of folklore & the supernatural
(2) A nature spirit—a seasonal “deity,” like the Spirit of Christmas Present in Dickens’ Christmas Carol
(3) A pagan—APPARENTLY
   In this poem, nothing is ever quite what it SEEMS to be on the surface. The Green Knight is also (really?) Sir Bercelak de Haute Desert, a conventional, Christian member of the lesser nobility.
   Dying and reborn, as it were, a figure of Christ?
In these terms Gawain would (seem to) represent
(1) A “civilized” human who encounters the “spooky,”
    unaccountable forces of “spiritual” life that
civilization struggles to control or repress.
(2) Artifice and cultivation—what we call “civilized.”
(3) A Christian—Mary’s Knight, in fact.

Let’s look at how some of these thematic tensions work themselves out in the narrative of the poem.

“This [boyish] king lay at Camelot at Christmastide. . . .
While the New Year was new, but yesternight come,
This fair folk at feast two-fold was served. . . .
[And] he stands there in state, the stout young king,
Talking before the high table of trifles fair.
There Gawain the good knight by Guenevere sits.”
(A163-64:37, 61-62, 107-09)

The festivities are disrupted by the entrance of “an
unknown rider, / One the greatest on ground”:
“Great wonder grew in hall
At his hue most strange to see,
For man and gear and all
Were green as green could be.”    (A165:136-37, 147-50)

He swaggers around, asking “So whose in charge here?”
He is obviously unimpressed by the spectacle of lords and ladies engaging in their trivial pursuits; he has come to enliven the festivities by issuing a challenge—in effect, giving Arthur what he has recklessly asked for, a strange adventure.

The exchange of blows in this Part (I) of the poem anticipates the (much subtler and more hazardous) exchange of gifts in Part III, as well as the return engagement in Part IV.

— It is also worth noting that this 4-part structure, which begins and ends at the coming of the New Year, reflects the turning of the 4 seasons of the year:

A year passes apace, and proves ever new:
First things and final conform but seldom.
And so this Yule to the young year yielded place,
And each season ensued at its set time;
After Christmas there came the cold cheer of Lent,
When with fish and plainer fare our flesh we reprove;
But then the world’s weather with winter contends:
The keen cold lessens, the low clouds lift;
Fresh falls the rain in fostering showers
On the face of the fields; flowers appear.
The ground and the groves wear gowns of green;
Birds build their nests, and blithely sing
That solace of all sorrow with summer comes ere long.
    And blossoms day by day
    Bloom rich and rife in throng;
    Then every grove so gay
    Of the greenwood rings with song.

And then the season of summer with the soft winds,
When Zephyr sighs low over seeds and shoots;
Glad is the green plant growing abroad,
When the dew at dawn drops from the leaves,
To get a gracious glance from the golden sun.
But harvest with harsher winds follows hard after,
 Warns him to ripen well ere winter comes;
Drives forth the dust in the droughty season,
From the face of the fields to fly high in air.
Wroth winds in the welkin wrestle with the sun,
The leaves launch from the linden and light on the ground,
And the grass turns to gray, that once grew green.
Then all ripens and rots that rose up at first,
And so the year moves on in yesterdays many,
And winter once more, by the world’s law, draws nigh.

(A172-73:498-531)
This famous passage is, in one of its dimensions, a re-enactment on a macro-cosmic scale of the conflicts played out in the human microcosm, as the hero confronts the forces of primal nature—as well as the subtler forces, natural and artificial, at work within his own nature. —

What do the terms “microcosm” and “macrocosm” mean?

Meanwhile back in Camelot, Gawain has discovered that he must face a return engagement a year later. After the giant has retrieved it from the floor, the talking head speaks:
“Sir Gawain, forget not to go as agreed, And cease not to seek till me, sir, you find, As you promised in the presence of these proud knights. To the Green Chapel come, I charge you, to take Such a dint as you have dealt.” (A171:448-52)

That is the obvious challenge which Gawain must face, but the more serious challenge—to his integrity and his intelligence as well as to his courage—remains hidden from him until the end, until he has failed.

Just as he was taunted 3 times in the 1\textsuperscript{st} Fit (Section), he will be tempted 3 times in the 3\textsuperscript{rd}. And he will fail.
So that when the Giant strikes 3 times in the final (4\textsuperscript{th}) Fit, Gawain receives a slight nick in the neck.

The 2\textsuperscript{nd} Fit of the poem describes Gawain’s armor in great, symbolic detail—the pentangle. Then tells of his lonely wandering and merely alludes to his encounters with numerous monsters:

\begin{quote}
Many a cliff must he climb in country wild; 
Far off from all his friends, forlorn must he ride; 
At each strand or stream where the stalwart passed 
’Twere a marvel if he met not some monstrous foe, 
And that so fierce and forbidding that fight he must. 
So man were the wonders he wandered among 
That to tell but the tenth part would tax my wits. 
Now with serpents he wars, now with strange wolves, 
Now with wild men of the woods, 
that watched from the rocks, 
Both with bulls and with bears, and with boars besides, 
And giants that came gibbering from the jagged steeps. 
(A177:713-23)
\end{quote}

After traveling for many weeks (All through Advent: from All Saints day, November 1, until Christmas Eve), Gawain comes upon a ferly castle, where he agrees to rest until he must set forth on his adventure again.
The 3rd section of the poem narrates three days of hunting and being hunted. After the questing night has rested for three days, Gawain says he must resume his fearful quest. The Green Chapel? No problem, says the host: “Tarry till the fourth day And ride on the first of the year. We shall set you on your way; It is not two miles from here.” (A184:1075-78)

To while away the interim, host and guest agree to an exchange of gifts. The host will hunt while Gawain rests.

1st day: Host kills and gives Gawain a deer. Gawain gives him a kiss.

2nd day: Host gives Gawain a wild boar. Gawain kisses him twice.

3rd day: Host corners fox; Lady corners Gawain. She asks for a gift; Gawain says no. She offers a ring; Gawain says no. She offers her green girdle; he accepts. Host gives Gawain only a scrawny fox Gawain gives the Host three kisses. But not the Green Girdle.
And so, in the 4th Fit, the Green Knight takes three swings with his axe at Gawain’s neck, nicking him slightly the third time:

“I owed you a hit and you have it; be happy therewith! The rest of my rights here I freely resign. . . .
First I flourished with a feint, in frolicsome mood,
And left your hide unhurt—and there I did well
By the fair terms we fixed on the first night;
And fully and faithfully you followed accord:
Gave over all your gains as a good man should.
A second feint, sir, I assigned for the morning
You kissed my comely wife—each kiss you restored.
For both of these there behooved but two feigned blows
by right.

True men pay what they owe;
No danger then in sight.
You failed at the third throw,
So take my tap, sir knight.
For that is my belt about you, the same braided girdle,
My wife it was that wore it.”

(A209-210:2341-42, 2345-59)

Gawain is deeply humiliated, confesses to cowardice and greed, and asks forgiveness, which Sir Bercilak easily and graciously grants him—more graciously than Gawain receives it.
How easy it is to forgive; how hard to be forgiven.

So Gawain fails his test. Or does he? What does “failure” mean if one HAS to fail/fall in order to succeed?

Earlier, I tried to suggest and illustrate some patterns for you to think about, defined by dynamic tensions between

1. Old (Celtic) Folklore and New (French) Romance (of Chivalry)
2. Nature and Culture/Civilization/Art
3. Pagan and Christian

I would like to end with another pattern, woven out of the three I have glanced at, but not identical to any of them. This pattern is also a paradox. Let me state the matter this way: Gawain fails to measure up. BUT in order to succeed in his quest, he MUST fail. His failure is therefore fortunate.

His good fortune—if he has the grace to receive it—is that he becomes a fully human being, not the child-like perfect night he believed he was, but an imperfect, fallible human being.