

Derrida's Centrality in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

The titular characters of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* play the role of protagonist for only a short while before finding themselves overshadowed; King Arthur, the Lady, Morgan Le Fay, and even Guenevere prove themselves to be as or more important than the two characters found in the title. Without the Lady, Morgan Le Fay, and Guenevere, the poet would have no tale to tell of the rivalry between Gawain and the Green Knight. Characters that the poet scarcely mentions prove central in a way that pushes the protagonist to the side and puts them in a leading role. Post-structural philosopher Jacques Derrida argues that the center of a structure has the ability to be ever-changing; the focal-point of a structure--or in this case, a story--can move, switching from one point to another, one character to another, as a structure builds or a story unfolds. Derrida also discusses the concept of the center existing outside of the structure; the center acts as part of the structure but external. It does not abide by the rules of the structure; the eye of a hurricane is still a piece of the hurricane, but does not have the characteristic, chaotic weather of the surrounding storm. The progression of centrality from male to female characters proves Derrida's idea of an unfixed center in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, as well as confirming that Sir Gawain--and the chivalric values that he represents--is not the driving force of the poem; women control Gawain's story and chivalry as well.

Certain critics argue that it is possible to read *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a text that has strong feminine themes wherein women are the powerful actors rather than the men around them. I agree with this reading, and seek to understand how the Lady, Morgan Le Fay, and Guenevere play a controlling, powerful role in the story, yet also concede that the early pages of the poem lend themselves to a male-dominated reading that quickly turns to a female-dominated one. The three most prominent men in the poem--Sir Gawain, King Arthur,

and the Green Knight--quickly find themselves cast as supporting characters in a narrative driven by women's motives and their actions. Geraldine Heng argues that a male-dominated reading of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has limitations that a feminine reading does not. Heng describes the dynamic between Morgan Le Fay and Sir Gawain as a game, saying that "A player, Gawain, is drawn into Morgan's game" (Heng 501). Morgan's plot to threaten Camelot acts as a game in which Gawain is a simple player. This metaphor places Morgan in a powerful role that helps explain how the men in the poem, especially Gawain and the Green Knight, do not act of their own accord, but rather in accordance with her plans. David Boyd also argues in favor of Morgan as a controlling figure in the poem rather than Gawain or the Green Knight, and says that Morgan does not play by traditional rules, again calling to mind the idea of the story as a game. I strive to build upon the arguments posed by Heng and Boyd, arguing that, while men do play a central role in the beginning of the poem, it is the women who drive the narrative as a whole, becoming apparent in Fitts 2-4.

In his discussion on structures, Derrida poses the idea of the center, a fixed point (with point referring to an actual physical point or a figurehead/leader) which anchors a structure. Concerning structure, Derrida says that "structure--or rather the structurality of structure--although it has always been involved, has always been neutralized or reduced, and this by a process of giving it a center or referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin" (Derrida 915). Derrida explains that the structure--the pieces of anything from a physical building to an idea--can be altered by defining an anchor point in the structure. The word "neutralized" implies that the structure itself is not stable, and thus structures themselves are not fixed. The combination of a structure and a center yields an unstable configuration, one that changes and fluctuates rather than remains standard. Continuing on with the idea of the center--the anchor

point--Derrida claims that “the center is not the center” (Derrida 915). Derrida says that the center of a structure exists as both a part of the structure and not; the center occupies a role within the structure, but has defining traits that characterize it as separate from the whole. In using the word “center” to describe what the center is and is not, twice within this statement, rather than a different phrase for the second usage of the word “center,” Derrida furthers his point; he defines “center” as “center” while also saying that this is not true, so “center” is not “center.” Derrida’s center, then, changes as time passes or a story goes on. It is not one thing or one figure. Derrida discusses the concept of dismantling structures and determining all of the ways in which they can be configured; in defining the center as unfixed, he says that a person can reconfigure a structure by altering the center. The structure in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is chivalric society (Arthur’s court and Camelot). The center is meant to be Sir Gawain--a perfect image of chivalric values--yet, as Derrida explains, the center is never the center, and Sir Gawain (and thus his idea of chivalry) does not act as the center of his own story.

Arriving unannounced in Arthur’s court, the Green Knight serves as the first character to prove that Derrida’s center is unfixed; the Green Knight takes the place of King Arthur as the central figure in court. When his challenge is met with silence, the Green Knight addresses the court, saying “Now the revelry and repute of the Round Table / Are overthrown with a word from one man’s mouth, / For you all cower in fear before a blow has been struck!” (*Sir Gawain* 313-315). The Green Knight mocks the Round Table for their hesitation to rise to his challenge, laughing at them for being silenced in fear by one man. The singularity of this passage--one word and one man--allows the poet to explore the idea of the Round Table as weak, bowing under one man’s axe, not even an army. It is in this passage that the Green Knight cements himself as central, as worthy of appearing in the title; he shows the court and the reader that he is

a true threat to Arthur's court and his Round Table, not just a stranger travelling through but one with the power to silence and prompt fear from a renowned group of knights. On structurality, Derrida says that "it has always been thought that the center, which is by definition unique, constituted that very thing within a structure which governs the structure, while escaping structurality" (Derrida 915). Historically speaking, the center of a structure is both the ruling figure within the structure yet also not bound by the rules of the structure. "Unique" defines the center well in this phrase, acting as the one word that explains fully what the center can be; part of the structure, ruler of the structure, yet still other: unique. Derrida, then, argues that the center of a structure has power over the structure yet is separate from it at the same time, much like how the Green Knight holds power over Arthur's court as he states his intimidating proposition yet is never considered a part of the court. When he arrives in court and challenges the knights of the Round Table, the Green Knight threatens Arthur, his reputation and his chivalric court. Greg Walker specifically discusses the Green Knight's effect on Arthur, saying that "his offer of hospitality has been rejected, his honourable reputation questioned, his youth derided, and his court ridiculed" (Walker 116). The Green Knight has tarnished Arthur's reputation by not accepting the King's invitation to dine with him and has ridiculed and mocked both Arthur's youthful reputation and his court. Both "derided" and "ridiculed" have similar definitions; Walker's focus on Arthur's humiliation using these terms emphasizes the extent to which the Green Knight has mocked Arthur and his court by his uninvited appearance. The Green Knight's sudden appearance and challenge dethroned Arthur, putting the knight on a pedestal rather than the King and making the knight the center of attention rather than Arthur.

Gawain rises to the Green Knight's challenge, taking the chore from Arthur and taking as well the central role in the story. The final lines of Fitt 1 set the tone for the next sections of the

poem wherein Gawain is the focal character. The poet writes: “Now take good care, Gawain, / Lest fear hold you back / From leaving on the quest / You have sworn to undertake” (*Sir Gawain* 487-490). The poet urges Gawain to prepare for his quest, to not let fear dissuade him from leaving in a year’s time to seek out the Green Knight as he has promised. Gawain, in swearing to take the Green Knight’s quest upon his own shoulders, has made himself the center of the story. In this we see how the poet explains how the rest of the story will follow Gawain on his quest. Continuing his discussion on centrality, Derrida says that “the concept of centered structure...is contradictory coherent” (Derrida 915). The idea of a structure containing a center is both coherent and not in unity. In saying that the centered structure is “contradictory coherent,” Derrida explains that the structure, although coherent, cannot be truly coherent because a center is both part of and separate from the structure it is a part of. This plays into Derrida’s overarching post structural philosophy, claiming that no structure is ever completed even if it contains a center because this center makes it paradoxically complete and incomplete. Pertaining to Gawain and his story, Gawain is both part of his story and not. He accepts the Green Knight’s challenge, placing himself as central, yet at the same time Morgan controls the Green Knight and the story and thus she is central instead. Following the interaction between the Green Knight and King Arthur, Greg Walker also touches on Gawain’s response, saying that “Gawain (re)enters the narrative from the ranks of the assembled courtiers in an attempt to rescue his king and the court as a whole from the potentially disastrous situation that Arthur’s response to the Knight’s taunts has created” (Walker 116). Gawain, who had previously been silent, now enters the interaction between Arthur and the Green Knight, removing himself from the masses and placing himself as separate from them, acting to stop the situation from escalating any more than it already has. Walker writes Arthur as the cause of a “disastrous situation” and Gawain as the remedy, placing

Gawain in a place of more power than Arthur and cementing the poet's claim that Arthur has a childish manner. Gawain, in joining the conversation between the knight and Arthur, has shown the court and his King that he is powerful and wise enough to intervene in such a situation, placing himself--whether intentionally on his part or not--in the role of true center at this point.

Once Gawain enters Hautdesert, the center role shifts to the Lady as she acts as his temptress and redefines his concept of chivalry. As Gawain rests and awaits the return of the Lord, the Lady comes to him and tests his chivalry by projecting her own version of chivalry onto him. Having spent much time with Gawain while her husband hunted away from the castle, the Lady says

So good a knight as Gawain is rightly reputed,
 In whom courtesy is so completely embodied,
 Could not easily have spent so much time with a lady
 Without begging a kiss, to comply with politeness,

By some hint or suggestion at the end of a remark. (*Sir Gawain* 1297-1301)

She tells Gawain that, because the two have spent so much time alone together, it would go against the code of chivalry to deny her a kiss, as it would be polite to do so. Chivalric code dictates that Gawain, as a knight, must respect the Lady as she is a woman; to deny her kiss would break chivalric code, yet accepting her kiss would do the same, as she is another man's wife. The Lady has power in this situation, the ability to test Gawain's chivalric morals using her femininity to coerce a kiss from him as well as the ability to damage his reputation doing the same. She dismantles traditional chivalry and rebuilds it to fit her own purpose, placing herself and her version of chivalry as central rather than Gawain. Derrida discusses the idea of the significant and signification in his paper on poststructural ideas. On this topic he says that "the

movement of signification adds something, which results in the fact that there is always more, but this addition is a floating one because it comes to perform a vicarious function, to supplement a lack on the part of the signified" (Derrida 923). The transfer of meaning yields more; the meaning of one thing can move to another, yet at the same time, this new meaning is only a semblance of the original. The word "vicarious" implies that the new meaning, while also adding more to the subject, only exists as a means for the original to still be seen and understood. Derrida's overarching idea is that of the center and the structure; in this, the central meaning of a word can change, but the structure remains the same. While Derrida spoke of words, his concepts apply to story as well. The Lady, though Gawain's temptress, does not act of her own accord. Morgan acts vicariously through her; the Lady transfers Morgan's plan to Gawain, to fulfillment, through her actions. When discussing the result of the Lady's temptation of Sir Gawain, Michelle Sweeney says that "Gawain may have kept his chastity, but he has lost his honor and perhaps even his chance to be redeemed...*Salvation* in chivalric terms might be usefully defined as honor (re)established" (Sweeney 167). While Gawain was never sexually physical with the Lady, her kiss and her temptation of him were damaging enough to his chivalric values that he lost the honor and glory that came with maintaining those values. Chivalric knights hold honor in high regard; in his loss of honor and his chance to find redemption, Gawain loses a central piece of his sense of self. The Lady, as a temptress of Gawain, rewrote his code of chivalry, chipping away at his sense of self, taking over the role of both center and definer of what chivalry entails, at least until Morgan Le Fay's plan became known.

Morgan takes the mantle from the Lady, dismantling rather than simply redefining chivalry as she becomes the apparent central character. Of Morgan, the Green Knight says

She sent me in this shape to your splendid hall

To make trial of your pride, and to judge the truth
 Of the great reputation attached to the Round Table.
 She sent me to drive you demented with this marvel,
 To have terrified Guenevere and caused her to die
 With horror at that figure who spoke like a spectre
 With his head in his hand before the high table. (*Sir Gawain* 2456-2462)

The Green Knight did not act of his own accord. Morgan sent him to Camelot to carry out her own plot, to kill Guenevere and drive Arthur's court mad, and to test their pristine reputation. Morgan drives the story; the Green Knight says "she sent me in this shape" and "she sent me to drive you demented" revealing that Morgan has control over the course of the story. Everything that happened in the poem, from the Green Knight's beheading in Camelot to Gawain's stay at Bertilak's castle, was part of Morgan's plan to test and threaten the chivalric reputation of Arthur's court. Morgan only appeared once in the poem, as the old woman in Bertilak's court, yet she held power over the Green Knight and Sir Gawain, both renowned knights; she was the central figure because she controlled the players. Derrida argues in favor of a decentered center, a center that is both a key part of a structure and not. He says that "classical thought concerning structure could say that the center is, paradoxically, *within* the structure and *outside* it" (Derrida 915). Derrida's center exists both within the structure that it is central to and not at the same time; the center shares details with the structure yet retains its own unique characteristics. The center of a structure is a part of it but does not necessarily need to abide by the same rules and happenings of the structure. This idea plays into Derrida's poststructural theory as it claims that the structure is not a true whole even though it may seem to be that way. The center--the core of the structure--is not a true part of the structure and thus the structure is faulty. Morgan is the

center of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in this way. She appears to Gawain only once and the Green Knight mentions her briefly; the poet hardly writes her as part of the story, yet the story happens because of her. She is the center, yet not a true part of the story as she barely acts in it. Gail Ashton argues in favor of the reading of Morgan as a crucial figure within the poem. She says, concerning Morgan's work at Hautdesert, "Her unseen but active work here usurps conventional gender positions...In this way she is able to slip from Camelot to Hautdesert and back, proximate (physically next to or allied by blood ties) to all and yet central to the poem" (Ashton 55). Because Morgan does not confine herself to traditional feminine gender roles, seen especially in her disguised description when meeting Gawain, Morgan has the ability to assert her influence without others noticing her. Ashton describes Morgan as "proximate" to the happenings of the poem; Morgan is always near, always influencing the course of the story even though she is not often physically present. The central role shifts to Morgan when the Green Knight reveals her plan to test Camelot; Morgan's plan drives the story all along.

Following Fitt 1--a section dominated by the transfer of centrality between men--the following sections of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* reveal that the women of the poem have always been the driving force of the story. Morgan Le Fay and the Lady of Hautdesert deceive Gawain, attack his chivalric values, and attempt to threaten Arthur and the Round Table in a story that shows the true protagonists are those that do not appear in the title. The Lady has no name and Morgan only physically appears once in the poem, yet the lack of names or appearances does not mean that these women lacked power. Derrida claims that the center of a structure shifts. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* Gawain and his chivalric identity find themselves decentralized in favor of the Lady, Morgan Le Fay, and their own depictions of chivalry in a tale that reveals that the characters that we would often push to the side--the

characters that are scarcely mentioned and the characters that have no names--are the ones that hold the most responsibility for driving a story.

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