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Gawain the Exile: Reading 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight' in a Postcolonial Context

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GAWAIN THE EXILE:

READING *SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT* IN A POSTCOLONIAL CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

In his essay "Reflections on Exile," Edward Said writes that the experience of the exile transcends definitions that seek to confine it to the traditionally defined post-colonial period, noting that "in other ages, exiles have similar cross-cultural and transnational visions, suffered the same frustrations and miseries, [and] performed the same elucidating and critical tasks." This principle, decisive in the articulation of post-colonial theory, nonetheless finds numerous points of resonance in pre-colonial periods. The state of exile that Said describes is one that can be found in texts across cultures and historical periods, and is particularly relevant to the anonymous Middle English poem known as Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. An Arthurian text that largely dispenses with Arthur, Sir Gawain instead focuses on the journey of an exile. Expelled from his home, Gawain spends much of the text as a man without a country. This state between realms and the entirety of Sir Gawain can be better understood in the context of Postcolonial theory, specifically the relationship of the subject and space developed in Homi Bhabha's concept of the "Third Space" put forth in The Location of Culture and Edward Said's discussion of exile. The interplay and power struggle between cultures in these theories is applicable to the case of Gawain and his role in the poem. Through these lenses, we see the confrontation between The Green Knight and Arthur as one not only of historic and religious importance, but also political and psychological. Gawain, as an exile from Arthur's court and therefore belonging solely to a third space characterized by radical ambiguity, acts as a mediator between two worlds and serves to more clearly define them both. Applying postcolonial theory in the study of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight enables the understanding of the medieval text as an interaction of language, time and space that unfolds simultaneously on multiple poetic strata.

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In his essay "Reflections on Exile," Edward Said writes that the experience of the exile transcends definitions that seek to confine it to the traditionally defined post-colonial period, noting that "in other ages, exiles have similar cross-cultural and transnational visions, suffered the same frustrations and miseries, [and] performed the same elucidating and critical tasks." This principle, decisive in the articulation of post-colonial theory, nonetheless finds numerous points of resonance in pre-colonial periods. Thus many texts completed centuries before Said or even colonialism existed seem to demand to be read within postcolonial contexts. The state of exile that Said describes is one that can be found in texts across cultures and historical periods, and is particularly relevant to the anonymous Middle English poem known as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Sir Gawain is a story primarily concerned, not with characters, but with space. An Arthurian text that largely dispenses with Arthur, *Sir Gawain* instead focuses on the journey of an exile. Expelled from the court of King Arthur and his home, Gawain spends much of the text as a man without a country. He belongs, for a time, neither to Arthur, Bertilak, nor to The Green Knight. The significance of the spaces in which Gawain finds himself, as well as where he may belong makes *Sir Gawain* an example of a medieval text that finds much of its meaning in the relationship between spaces. Attention to instances of spatial theory like this is a subject of some scholarly interest in more recent medieval literary studies, but these issues take on new meaning when viewed within a theoretical framework that has not yet been thoroughly explored. The ambiguous state between realms and the entirety of *Sir Gawain* can be better understood in the context of Postcolonial theory, specifically the relationship of the subject and

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space developed in Homi Bhabha's concept of the "Third Space" put forth in *The Location of Culture* and Edward Said's discussion of exile. The interplay and power struggle between cultures that is discussed in these theories is directly applicable to the case of Gawain and his role in the poem. Through these lenses, we immediately see the confrontation between The Green Knight and Arthur as one not only of historic and religious importance, but also political and psychological. Gawain, as an exile from Arthur's court and therefore belonging solely to a third space characterized by radical ambiguity, acts as a mediator between two worlds and serves to more clearly define them both.

Applying postcolonial theory in the study of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* enables the understanding of the medieval text as an interaction of language, time and space that unfolds simultaneously on multiple poetic strata. In Said's felicitous wording, a postcolonial reading is uniquely suited to expose the ways in which *Sir Gawain* operates contrapuntally. This concept of counterpoint, originally found in music as a relationship between disparate melodic lines coming together to form a harmony, is expanded by Said and used to suggest that contrapuntal readings are necessary to understand the true nature of texts of the post-colonial era. Instead of lines of music, experiences are what must be viewed as coming together harmonically. As he writes in *Culture and Imperialism:*

> [A reader] must be able to think through and interpret together experiences that are discrepant, each with its particular agenda and pace of development, its own internal formations, its internal coherence and system of external relationships, all of them coexisting and interacting with others. (32)

Contrapuntal readings understand that independent elements (most notably in his framework, the history of colonial oppression in England and the characters of the English novel who may never encounter that oppression, visible in works by Jane Austen) work together, no matter how incongruent they may seem, to create the reality of the text. Each line, or experience, is an inseparable part of the finished piece. If one is removed, the text could not exist. As they do in music, point and counterpoint combine and become one.

Not only does the idea of counterpoint, when transposed from music to literature, enable us to better understand the complexities of space that underscore the narrative of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, it also offers the framework in which a postcolonial reading of a medieval text such as this is possible. Contrapuntal interpretation lets the past and present be considered together, independent and yet comprising one whole. Though originally devised by Said as a tool to allow readers to attend to the colonial past inherent in culture and fiction, this same idea suggests that literature of the past might be viewed through more modern approaches to theory, even those profoundly affected by recent historical and cultural events. As Said says:

> In juxtaposing experiences with each other, in letting them play off each other, it
> is my interpretative political aim (in the broadest sense) to make concurrent those
> views and experiences that are ideologically and culturally closed to each other
> and that attempt to distance or suppress other views and experiences. (33)

The same idea of contrapuntalism that allows the past to be a part of present culture can, therefore, do the reverse. It allows us to bring the cultural production of the past in conversation with the literary theory of today. Such readings make space in contemporary theory for the relevance of texts like *Sir Gawain*, and indeed, of medieval literature as a whole. Though not

strictly defined by colonialism, study that simultaneously takes into account past and present can be seen to incorporate the purpose of Said's work in the contrapuntal study of literature; he said that in order to do justice to texts in our reading of them, "we should keep before us the prerogatives of the present as signposts and paradigms for the study of the past" (61). When read alongside each other and allowed to work together, both *Sir Gawain* and postcolonial theory are changed and enriched by the other, and can be identified as independent parts of a cohesive whole.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a particularly apt example of how well such study can be fruitfully applied. It has long been subjected to quasi-contrapuntal readings, though critics have not recognized them as such. It is unique among contemporary medieval works in several aspects that can be best understood in a postcolonial framework. One of these elements that has long been a subject of study is the complexity and interwoven nature of its plotlines. As A.C. Spearing writes in *The Gawain-Poet: A Critical Study,* the text consists of several concurrent "games"—the Beheading Game that drives the story, Lady Bertilak's temptation, and the Exchange of Winnings between Gawain and Bertilak -- that weave together to form the larger poetic fabric. For Spearing, this interconnecting structure of games plays a key role in integrating the text as a whole, and this peculiar unity is part of what makes *Sir Gawain* so unique among Arthurian texts. He writes,

> The poet has often been praised for the skill with which he links these elements together, but he has not perhaps been sufficiently praised for the way in which he makes this linkage itself convey the meaning of the poem…It will be remembered that the plot-elements are not linked consecutively, but inserted one into another. (181)

These interlocking games act together not only to create an engaging plot, but to draw attention to its very nature as a contrapuntal text. The games seem independent of one another but are all indelibly linked. The very fact that they all weave together throughout the story and in the end are proven to be one, larger game make the entire poem an example of how Gawain's experience in one element affects all the others. The idea behind this is not new; contrapuntal readings have always been necessary to understand the significance of events within the story. And yet, naming it as contrapuntalism and placing it within the realm of postcolonial theory allows for recognition of the way in which that interplay defines the text.

Another aspect that Spearing identifies as extraordinary in *Sir Gawain* is its unusual attention to space. He observes how "the Gawain-poet, in fact, goes much further than any English artist of the fourteenth century in opening up and entering into the spatial world of his work" (38). The distinct spaces that are established, most notably the court and the realm outside, are not only settings for the story performed by characters, but themselves serve as primary agents within the action of the story. They act upon the characters and change them, but more importantly, they act in concert with and exert their influence on each other.

Spearing suggests that the significant agency of spaces within *Sir Gawain* is a large part of what distinguishes the poem from contemporary works. While it is true that the Gawain-poet is unusually creative in his manipulation of senses of space (as will be discussed later) the role that space plays in medieval literature as a whole has recently become the subject of closer study. *Place, Space, and Landscape in Medieval Narrative* is a collection of essays that seek to better understand this role. In her introduction to the book, Laura Howe clarifies the necessity of recognizing the role of space in medieval literature, saying that it, "exerts its pressure upon us…and the premodern authors who walked and built and wrote knew this" (vii). Drawing on

the example of the construction of space within the great cathedrals of medieval Europe, Howe shows that spatial theory is an integral part of the culture of the middle ages. The examination of space is therefore coming to be accepted as just relevant in these texts as in modern ones.

We can recognize the terms with which Howes discusses medieval space in the poetics of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. She begins by drawing a distinction between place and space: "in contrast with 'place,' which identifies static relationships, the concept of 'space' is defined by movement and by human experience" (viii). This distinction separates setting and how it plays a part in a text from a concept of spaces that affect and are affected by what happens in them. Such a definition is particularly useful in the application of postcolonial theory to medieval literary works; rather than simply dealing with setting and geographical locality, Howe's definition of space focuses on the expression of confluence and play between cultures. Postcolonial theory assumes that one culture or state exerts authority and power over another. In a text that does not contain what could easily be recognized as a metropole or a colonized culture, the spatial theory and definition that Howe identifies nevertheless allow for a politics of power to be discussed in and between textual spaces.

The relevance of postcolonial theory within the politics of space in medieval literature is further explored in John M. Ganim's essay, "Landscape and Late Medieval Narrative." Ganim, introducing the same collection, explores recent scholarship in what he calls the medieval politics of space. He notes that the growing importance of such conversations have been driven in part by questions pertaining to postcolonialism. He argues that "postcolonial studies have also rendered newly important the political and cultural significance of space, exposing colonial historiographies as masks for conquest" (xx). Ganim recognizes the potential for readings that highlight the depiction of space within medieval texts and assume that those representations are

just as noteworthy theoretically as representations of character. These spatial representations, then, are best understood in the hierarchies that constitute postcolonial readings and theoretical backgrounds.

It is no mistake that the examination of space in these texts is so productive. Ganim writes that "details of background and representations of space were designed to further the rhetorical purpose of the text or the image, to be 'read' as a clearly understood sign" (xvi). This acknowledgement of space as significant is not only useful, it was intended by the poet. It is therefore necessary in the case of texts like *Sir Gawain* to use discussion of space as a basis of understanding not only what relevance it might have, but even what the author intended to be said to the audience. Poetic space is not limited to purely geographical significance and was never meant to be. Spaces are representative of concepts and provide context for the action. When examining the interplay and structures of power inherent in spaces, particularly in medieval texts, it can be assumed that the spaces have conceptual value distinct from political commitments and are symbolic of other power struggles and relationships within a text.

This intention only serves to further highlight the usefulness of postcolonial examination of space within medieval texts. Ganim further says that:

> While the crusades are often described as the origin of Western expansionism
> and colonial conquest, the actual spatial and geographic experience was
> sufficiently complex and disorienting as to require the full apparatus of
> postcolonial theory. (xx)

Postcolonialism can be so useful in interpreting medieval texts precisely because it allows for a better understanding of how spaces, as isotopic markers of humanity and culture, interact with

each other and upon people. This is the very theory Said discusses in *Culture and Imperialism*, the idea that "all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogenous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic" (xxv). It is not only literature affected by colonialism that can incorporate this idea, but this theory is also an integral part of medieval texts like *Sir Gawain*.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight takes places in three distinct spaces: King Arthur's court, Bertilak's castle, and the entirety of the space between them through which Gawain travels, represented in a distilled form in the Green Chapel. It is through Gawain that these spaces are linked and can be understood contrapuntally. The contrapuntal nature of these spaces, however, only becomes clear when Gawain sets out in the role of the exile. Exile is a necessary element for the Green Chapel to exist, as well as for the interplay between the courts of Arthur and Bertilak.

Exile, however, is too large a concept to apply to a single character or text without establishing its parameters. There is not one form of exile, but several that have existed since man began to establish groups from which one could be cast out. In the influential 1967 essay "Homo Viator," Medievalist Gerhart Ladner seeks to define the forms of exile with which Medieval Europe would have been most familiar. These forms, entirely religious in nature, are the basis for how exile came to be known after. According to him, "we must then remember that medieval thought had derived from its early Christian sources not one, but two ideas of alienation, and was to make them lastingly its own: estrangement from God and estrangement from the world" (237-8). The more common of the two is alienation from the Order of God, a state of being that is "something very evil, something to be avoided at all costs" though it is nonetheless "found innumerable times in early Christian and medieval literature" (235). This

exile is not a physical experience, but a spiritual one. It is a metaphorical and internal separation. This is not the primary state of exile that Gawain experiences. He is hardly alienated from god; the poet tells us that "alle his afyaunce upon folde was in the fyve woundes" (642). He is thoroughly dedicated to his Christianity, placing his faith within the five wounds of Christ and what they represent. This is not presented ironically; Gawain's faith is shown as a defining aspect of his character. Similarly, later in the poem Gawain "schrof hym schyrly and schewed his mysdedes," (1880). If there were any sin alienating him from God, this full confession would presumably absolve him of it.

Ladner's second form of exile is perhaps closer to what we see in Gawain. Instead of separating the exile from God, this form works to draw them closer to him. Alienation from the world, in stark contrast to alienation from God, epitomizes the idea that "temporal comfort on this earth is to the just man what the bed in an inn is to the *viator*, to the traveler on his journey: he will rest in it bodily, but mentally he is already somewhere else" (235). This form of exile, while no less internal and spiritual than Ladner's other category, is still closely tied to the physical and spatial experience that we see acted out by the character of Gawain. Marrying the separation of internal desire from the world with the physical self from society combines metaphorical and physical space in the same way that Gawain's experience does. However, this second category still fails to completely encompass Gawain's peculiar state of exile. This becomes clear if we consider the type of character that results from worldly exile. In its ideal from, Ladner explains, wordly exile gives rise to the figure of the wandering monk. His distinctive activity, called *Peregrinatio*, is a form of exile defined principally by its relation to religious denial. The wanderer's separation, the nature of his exile, is only a side effect of his closeness to God. This is where the image of "pilgrimage, of homelessness, of strangeness in

this world" becomes a religious vocation and where Gawain's quest must be seen to diverge (237). While in exile from Arthur's court, the knight still partakes in all the worldly pleasures available in Bertilak's court, and "much dut was ther driven that day and that other / and the thryd as thro thronge in therafter" (1020-1). The pleasure that Gawain enjoys while in the court necessarily precludes him from this category, and yet he remains an exile.

It is in a third conception of medieval exile that Gawain's quest begins to become more familiar. In this conception, *peregrinatio,* that form of life "without which the chivalric ideals of the High Middle Ages could hardly have developed," becomes definitively separated from a religious context (246). In both categories - alienation from God or alienation from the world - religion and Christianity were the central point around which exile revolved. This third kind of exile establishes a new central point; as Ladner says, "no longer, therefore, is it always the love of God and adherence to hallowed sanctions which are the touchstones of order or alienation" (247). For exile's most basic tenet is expulsion, involuntary or not, from a central point. Whether it is a physical or metaphorical point is immaterial. The central Order shifts in the later middle ages from this Christian conception to one based on secular Orders, and "for the first time in Christian history there were let loose in full force the vast potentialities of man's alienation from man" (256). In the first two examples, alienation and exile are entirely self-imposed. God does not force separation in the first exile. Rather, it is man who chooses to alienate himself from God through worldliness. The second form represents simply the inversion of the first.

It is then this third exile to which Gawain might belong. Ladner, however, fails to expound much on what it entails. He tells us that from this concept "there arose in the literature of the second half of the twelfth century that fateful image of the knight-errant who must seek

out the hostile forces of the world and find his own self in a ceaseless course of *aventure,*" and

this seems to fit *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* perfectly (246). And yet the knightly quest,

defined by voluntary departure and representations of heroic ideals, can hardly be said to be

exile at all, at least not in the manner that we will find described by Said and attested in

postcolonial literature. It is necessary then, to establish a fourth conception of exile to fit his

unique situation. He is an exile, but not in any of the ways strictly delineated in Ladner's piece.

Instead what separates this iteration of Gawain from the typical knight errant of the

medieval romance is primarily the nature of the task he must undertake. As the poem opens, we

encounter Arthur and his court anxiously awaiting adventure. Our expectations for the events

that follow are the same as Arthur's:

> That he thurgh nobelay had nomen he wolde never ete
>
> Upon such a dere day, er hym devised were
>
> Of sum aventurus thing an uncouthe tale,
>
> Of sym mayn mervayle that he might trawe,
>
> Of alders, of armes, of other aventures (91-95)

We expect the same kind of adventure that the typical literature of the knight errant has given

us.

This is, however, not what the poet provides. Almost immediately after establishing

what is expected by the court, the Green Knight bursts into the hall, interrupting the celebration

and silencing everyone within. He seemingly answers the desire for adventure and yet he is so

strange and terrifying, that no one within the hall moves. When he introduces the game that will

come to underpin the poem, the reaction of those of the court signals its strange nature. At first

no one moves to take up the challenge, "If he hem stowned upon fyrst, stiller were thane / alle

the heredmen in halle, the hygh and the lowe" (301-2) Even Arthur falters before taking up the

challenge, though the poet tells us he is "kene bi kynde" (181). The court only reacts when they

feel they have been insulted. Thus it is made clear to us that the nature of the game and the

quest that is given is of such a serious nature that even the brave king waiting for an adventure

is stunned by the challenge. This is not a game to be taken lightly.

Even after Arthur is ready to take up the call, the danger is reiterated to us when the

previously silent Gawain begs the king to defer and allow him to accept the challenge instead.

> For me think hit not semly, as hit is soth knawen,
>
> Ther such an asking is hevened so hyghe in your sale,
>
> Thagh ye yourself be talenttyf, to take hit to yourselven,
>
> Whil mony so bolde yow aboute upon bench sytten,
>
> That under heven, I hope, non hagherer of wylle,
>
> No better bodyes on bent ther baret is rered.
>
> I am the wakkest, I wot, and of wyt feeblest,
>
> And lest lur of my lyf, quo laytes the sothe. (348-55)

Gawain offers to replace the king in the game not only because it is courteous for a vassal to

assume dangers on behalf of his lord, but because the loss of Arthur would be far too great.

Gawain insists that if he were to die it simply would not matter as much. Unlike him, Arthur

constitutes his own space. When Gawain is cut off from a court, he is made into a wanderer, an

exile. The spaces through which he travels are independent of him. Arthur's death, on the other

hand, would constitute the death of his court and culture. Similarly, if exile is what allows

Gawain to move between and experience disparate spaces, Arthur would not be able to serve the

same purpose, as he brings his court and space with him. As a result, the poet must impress upon us the idea that challenge is so great that even "the wyghtest and the worthiest of the worldes kynde" are slow to react, and instead a lesser knight, one who can be cut off from the court, must take up the call (261).

The danger is also notable because it is clear that this is not the sort of quest from which a knight is expected to return. A knight errant might take up a quest, fulfill it, and return home – this would not be an example of exile, either as Ladner or Said define it. Gawain, however, chooses to go in the full knowledge that it will be his end. The rest of the court is also fully aware of this, as "There was much derne doel driven in the sale" (558). They know that it is more than likely that Gawain will not return. It is, therefore, a permanent expulsion from the court, albeit one that is begrudgingly accepted.

If this were the kind of challenge that could be lightly taken on, the poet would not have repeatedly called attention to the grim reaction of those gathered. The challenge is unlike anything they had ever seen, or "For fele sellyes had thay sen, bot such never are" (238). Highlighting the danger and strange nature of the quest shows that when Gawain accepts it, it is only because action is absolutely necessary. This is not a quest taken up totally freely, and therefore the exile that accompanies it is not self-imposed. The constant reiteration of the horror of the court and the reminders of the danger inherent in the quest are there to impress upon the reader the fact that this quest is not entirely voluntary and is therefore not the sort of quest a knight errant would normally undertake. This underscores the exilic, rather than adventurous, nature of the journey Gawain must undertake.

Another idiosyncrasy of Gawain's quest is that he is not told exactly where to go to complete his challenge. He is made to wander in the unknown, and to experience what that means. The poet tells us that "Ther he fonde noght hym byfore the fare that he lyked. / Hade he no fere bot his fole bi frythes and dounes, / Ne no gome bot God bi gate wyth to karp" (694-696). He wanders as the exile does, a man without a country or peers to speak with, and with nowhere to call home. Despite the impossibility of finding anyone to speak to, by its very nature the quest requires Gawain to attempt to find help from others. The Green Knight insists that "The knight of the grene chapel men knowen me mony; Forthi me for to fynde, if thou fraystes, fayles thou never. / Therfore com, other recreaunt be calde the behoves" (454-6). Gawain does not simply search for the Green Chapel, but for someone who will acknowledge the existence of the space and thereby commune with him. This is practically impossible, however, because "Fer floten fro his frendes fremedly he rydes. / At uche warthe other water ther the wyye passed / He fonde a foo hym byfore, bot ferly hit were / And that so foule and so felle that feght hym byhode" (714-7). Not only can he not find help, he finds instead enemies at every ford. This is the total alienation of the exile. The instruction given to Gawain to find help from his countrymen only serves to emphasize the fact that, as an exile, he no longer has that option.

It is this physical separation that is the most reminiscent of the plight of the exile. In his article "Privacy, Community, and Society: Confession as a Cultural Indicator in 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,'" Anthony Low explores Gawain's relation to society through the act of confession. Low's assertion that confession is a means to reintegrate a sinner into the church, or an exile into society, depends upon this idea that Gawain is totally alienated. Low writes:

> [in] sharp contrast with the communal joy at court that opens the poem is the
> bleak isolation of Gawain's quest for the Green Chapel in its middle. The quest

resembles an exile. It evokes strong emotions: forlornness, forsakenness,

loneliness. The hero, deprived of the loving support of friends and companions,

is driven into himself. (12)

Low notes that the physical separation is crucial in that it turns Gawain's attention from the

outward bonds of fellowship to an inwardness and individualism. This inwardness that he

ascribes to Gawain's condition is what transforms his acquiescence to the impossible terms of

the game into more than a quest but into an interminable state of exile. Gawain's powerful,

inward sense of honor is what links the inner and the outer senses of this exile. As in Ladner's

first two medieval concepts of exile and alienation, part of Gawain's choice is due to his inner

life, a decision that is self-imposed rather than simply forced upon him. It is also this inner life

that most decidedly marks Gawain's quest as exilic. Although he is separated from society,

"Gawain does not need the community's presence to bolster his inward sense of honor. Honor is

not just a personal matter, any more than sin is. But Gawain is sufficiently at one with his

community to bear its honor and trust within himself" (Low 15). That he bears the honor

imprinted upon him by King Arthur's court is what makes it impossible for him to truly belong

in Bertilak's. He is no longer able to be a part of the former court because of his acceptance of

the quest, but too marked by that identity to ever become a part of another community.

Gawain's ultimate return to King Arthur's court thus presents a challenge to the idea that

Gawain was ever subjected to the condition of exile in the first place. If the realities of the game

and the physical experience of exile were all that he experienced, his pilgrimage would indeed

have ended and he would have been readmitted wholly and comfortably back into his home.

However, since his particular experience of exile occupies the new, fourth conception of exile

established here and a third space that encompasses both the inner and outer lives, Gawain

never truly returns home. He is indelibly marked by the experience of his exile, and is thus permanently changed. When Gawain returns to King Arthur, he does so with a sense of shame experienced while away from the court. This shame is physically represented by the green girdle, as he says that it "is the token of untrawthe that I am tan inne / and I mot nedes hit were wyle I may last" (2509-10). Arthur and his knights attempt to look beyond the girdle and what it represents, they:

> …comfortes the knight, and alle the court als
>
> Laghen loude therat, and luflyly acorden
>
> That lords and ladis that longed to the Table
>
> Uche burne of the brotherhede, a bauderyk schulde have,
>
> A bende abelef hym aboute, of a bryght grene (2514-7)

For another man, this might have been enough to be fully readmitted. And yet, they overlook the "bende of this blame I bere on my nek" as well as the vow that he takes to remember and be defined by his shame (2506). The laughter and adoption of the girdle is not enough to erase the inner meaning behind it. While the mark of the Arthur's court prevented him from being at home anywhere else, when he returns, the mark of his experience wandering prevents him from ever truly coming out of exile. This inner sense makes him remain in exile permanently.

The girdle is an important marker of Gawain's continued exile, not only because of how it signifies his inward sense of separation, but because of the implications of the reaction from Arthur and the rest of the court. A.C. Spearing writes that the strange reaction is an unexpected development, and even suggests that it changes the tone of the ending of the story. He notices that their adoption of the girdle is disrespectful, and that "In taking the green girdle as a badge

of honor, the courtiers are perverting its true meaning, which is known only to Gawain himself. Thus the poem could be seen as ending on a note of bitter irony" (222). Rather than seeking to understand, the courtiers of the Round Table appropriate and change Gawain's symbol for their own purposes. Such appropriation, drawing a signifier from another culture or experience and changing it to suit one's own culture, shows that Gawain is perceived as other and remains an exile, even though he is ostensibly welcomed back with open arms.

The role of the exile is one that allows Gawain to better explore the relationship between the spaces of the text. As Edward Said wrote of his own experience:

> Ever since I can remember, I have felt that I belonged to both worlds, without being completely of either one or the other…Yet when I say 'exile' I do not mean something sad or deprived. On the contrary, belonging, as it were, to both sides of the imperial divide enables you to understand them more easily. (xxvi-vii)

This is why Gawain's place as exile is so important. It is only through his ability to move easily through spaces in the way that Said describes that the courts of Arthur and Bertilak can be read clearly and contrapuntally. By existing in Arthur's court with no ties to any other, and then in spending time within Bertilak's, Gawain experiences both spaces and by extension allows the reader to experience them as well. This combined experience of both courts, as well as that of the state of exile, is not simply left to the imagination of the reader; the poet creates a third space, the Green Chapel, to clearly delineate these concepts. The space which the Green Chapel represents is a boundary between two worlds, and simultaneously the realm to which Gawain is exiled. While most of the poem takes place within the courts in which Gawain stays, it is the

Green Chapel that emerges as the defining space both for Gawain, and the courts between which it stands.

For such a significant setting in the text, The Green Chapel manages to elude clear description. Gawain spent many months searching for anyone who knew its location and found no one. When he finally comes across Bertilak and those who know the place, they steadfastly refuse to clarify what exactly constitutes the place. The servant who is finally able to point Gawain to the Chapel (markedly only after Gawain has experienced Bertilak's court) does so only in its relation to other landmarks. He also does not tell Gawain what to look for, only saying that "The place that ye prece to ful perilous is halden; / Ther wones a wyye in that waste, the worst upon erthe" (2097-8). His description is limited to speaking of it as the worst place upon the earth. He does not address what is there but only refers obliquely the Green Knight himself.

The only other notable aspect of the Green Chapel is how profoundly strange it is. Rather than being a chapel at all, it consists of a mound with "a hole on the ende on on ayther syde, / And overgrowen with gresse in glodes anywhere; / And al was holw inwith, nobot an olde cave, Or a crevisse of an olde cragge" (2180-3). The Green Chapel is not the sort of chapel Gawain would have been used to. The poet tells us of two other chapels, one at Arthur's court (63) and one at Bertilak's (930), and neither are described in detail, leading the reader to assume they are unremarkable examples of places of prayer. In contrast, the Green Chapel is a barrow; a fitting image because of the death Gawain expects to encounter there, but one that does not match with the expectation Gawain builds from previous experience. His reaction is to assume it serves the same kind of purpose that the court chapels do, but in service to the devil rather than God, saying

'Now iwysse,' quoth Wowayn, 'wysty is here;

This oritore is ugly, with erbes overgrowen.

Wel bisemes the wyye wruxled in grene

Dele here his devocioun on the develez wyse.' (2189-92)

The Chapel for Gawain is initially an amalgamation of his expectations of the role of a chapel: what it is and what it isn't. It is only after his encounter with the Green Knight, when Gawain realizes the interlocking nature of the games and of his actions in both courts, that the Green Chapel becomes more than a space to be compared to other spaces. The Chapel is where the consequences of all experiences are made clear. The final outcome of all the games are settled and revealed to be all a part of one.

It is the Green Chapel that serves as what Homi Bhabha calls the "beyond," or where cultures meet and define themselves. In his book *The Location of Culture,* Bhabha calls for an attention not to where characters come from, but to where those places are formed and identified. For Bhabha, it is necessary to look:

> beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself. (2)

In order, therefore, to truly establish what it would mean to be of the court of Arthur or the court of Bertilak there must be a meeting in a third space. This moment and process takes place in the

Green Chapel. It is there that the collaboration between the disparate elements of both Gawain and Bertilak, as both appear there, can occur. However, it must be mediated by the experience of between-ness that is established by leaving one's home. It is only after being fundamentally changed that characters can pass there: in Gawain's case, the choice to exile himself from his home and enter into the beyond, and in Bertilak's, the physical transformation that makes him at once familiar and strange.

This strangeness is essential so that differences can be delineated more sharply and the border that defines what is not strange can be more clearly drawn. One must lose what is normal in order to more clearly see the normal for what it is. As Bhabha says:

> "The negating activity is, indeed, the intervention of the 'beyond' that establishes a boundary a bridge, where 'presencing begins because it captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world – the unhomeliness – that is the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations. (9)

Presencing, the clear marking of these spaces, requires this unhomely quality. And it is this feature that is perfectly contained in the Green Chapel, because not only is it a place literally between the courts of Arthur and Bertilak, a neutral zone, it is not of the world they had inhabited. It is thoroughly the realm of the unhomely, a place where ultimately no one belongs, but is still familiar enough to the parties to which it serves as a border. Although the term is typically applied to post-colonial societies in which the colonizer and colonized meet, Bhabha notes that "it has a resonance that can be heard distinctly, or erratically, in fictions that negotiate the powers of cultural difference in a range of transhistorical sites" (9). The experience is one

that, while defined in the context of colonialism, could already be felt in the Pearl Poet's time and therefore resonate in *Sir Gawain*.

Although the Green Chapel is the ultimate representation of this space, it is not in and of itself the entirety of Bhabha's beyond. The experience outside of Arthur's court, the wilds of England in which Gawain spends much of a year and the entire location of his exile, serves as this beyond. Beyond is not as much a place as it is a space of experience, and "there is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the 'beyond': an exploratory, restless movement" (Bhabha 1). This perfectly encapsulates the meandering journey of Gawain, who does not know exactly where he is going but must search until he finds it. Movement is another of the essential qualities of this third space because:

> What is at issue is the performative nature of differential identities: the regulation and negotiation of those spaces that are continually, contingently, 'opening out,' remaking the boundaries…where difference is neither One nor the Other but *something else besides, in-between*. (219)

The in-betweeness of this state is predicated on the "opening out" of bordering spaces. In order to reach the in-between, the area in which culture is formed and identity constructed, it is necessary for Bertilak and Gawain to push out, carrying what has been established of their social identities, from their respective homes, and meet at the Chapel. The clash is what further establishes difference, which in turn solidifies identity.

Within the text, however, it is clear that pushing away from one's court is not an action easily taken. Gawain cannot simply leave and return unchanged, for his destination, the unhomely third space, is characterized in Edward Said's essay "Reflections on Exile" as, "just

beyond the frontier between 'us' and the 'outsiders' is the perilous territory of not-belonging" (140). If meeting in the Green Chapel requires a quality of movement and unhomeliness, exile is seemingly the perfect way to achieve that dual state. One cannot be too firmly attached to the world one has left, because "seeing the entire world as a foreign land makes possible originality of vision" that is necessary to map the borders of the familiar (148). Exile is the state of the perpetually unfamiliar. Gawain must be separated permanently from the world of Arthur and experience Bertilak's realm but not be a part of it, in order to exist within the third space represented by the Green Chapel.

Bertilak, while not an exile himself, still becomes a physical representation of what it means to be one. His appearance is that of a perfect knight in every way, save only his strange size and the fact that he is green. He bears the appearance accepted by the world from which he comes, his own courtly life, and yet is strangely marked by the magical. It is this strangeness, the same strangeness that Gawain takes on when he takes on the mantle of exile, that allows for passage into the third space. Both men experience, whether through actual exile or physical enchantment, what Said defines as exile: a " life led outside habitual order. It is nomadic, decentered, contrapuntal; but no sooner does one get accustomed to it than its unsettling force erupts anew" (149).

The establishment of identity that happens for both the realm of Bertilak and that of Arthur, the bordering spaces, within that of the third depends upon Said's idea of contrapuntalism. This is achieved through the experience of Gawain as exile, for as Said writes:

> For an exile, habits of life, expression or activity in the new environment
>
> inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment.

Thus both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally. (148)

Bhabha describes the third space as one that is thoroughly defamiliarized so that perspectives can meet and sharpen themselves against one another. This is the same action that defines exile; exile is itself the third space. The Green Chapel then, is both the embodiment of exile and of the border between worlds. The contrapuntalism that defines Said's conception of exile and, similiarly, Bhabha's third space, is what Gawain achieves as he undergoes his journey into the beyond. And once Gawain is there, not a part of either space but having experienced both, he is able to more clearly view them from his outside perspective.

The role that both Gawain and Bertilak serve is one that exists in and thrives on ambiguity. Part of the experience of exile is to be in an indistinct state of existence; one is no longer of any space. Belonging is eschewed and betweenness embraced. This exile and betweenness is represented within the text, not only as a geographical and societal state, but one that is encompassed in the characters themselves, as well as in their actions. When the Green Knight enters King Arthur's court, he is a figure whose ambiguity is integral to his character. He brings in one hand a sprig of holly, a symbol that peace, but in the other carries a terrible axe. He bears himself as a one who has seen war, but wears no armor and keeps his head uncovered. And most notably, he is courtly in his appearance and dress, the model of a perfect knight, and yet is simultaneously thoroughly otherworldly in his coloring and size. And in the text itself he does not act as a singular character, he occupies two roles: the lord of the castle as Bertilak and the strange Green Knight. The Green Knight is characterized by his ambiguity, and therefore to pass between spaces as he does, Gawain must embrace this same ambiguous state. He does so not only by embracing exile and becoming a man without a country, but also in the

act of accepting the girdle from Lady Bertilak. Previously a knight of outstanding virtue, Gawain's breaking of his own moral code as well as the rules of the game established by Bertilak compromises his identity and makes his role within the poem as indistinct as The Green Knight's.

This is the concept that Bhabha recognized within the boundaries between realms, and what defines the third space. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* encapsulates this idea so well because it incorporates the ambiguity of borders, of play, and of the role of exile. These elements meet in the Green Chapel, where the rules and identities of the courts of Bertilak and Arthur are simultaneously obscured and made clear. When Gawain and Bertilak meet there, the Chapel becomes a proving ground, not only for Gawain's own sense of identity but that of the spaces of which he has been a part. It is in the third space that the contrapuntal experiences of the games, of the courts, and of exile are made clear. While Bertilak's presence is made possible by a temporary enchantment, Gawain's is a result of his conscious decision to be changed forever. It is because of this that, when he returns to the court of Arthur that he can no longer be fully a part of it. The unsettled and decentered force, as Said calls it, has irredeemably disrupted Gawain's character and by extension the court of Arthur.

Both Gawain and the Green Knight are of The Green Chapel because they are uniquely separated from the conventional spaces of courtly life. The Green Knight is made, through magic, to be a man so strange in every aspect that he cannot be counted as a member of any court. He can only be a part of the Green Chapel, itself a space similarly defined by its strangeness. Gawain is made equally as strange as the Green Knight, and yet is not physically changed, nor is he affected by magic. His strangeness is instead derived from his experience as an exile. Because of this separation from the world, both characters have the ability to move

freely between spaces without being beholden to either. Exile gives Gawain the same quality that the Green Knight possesses.

This exile and strange magic opens the Third Space to them, given physical representation in The Green Chapel. It is a space defined both by ambiguity and clarity. In allowing itself to be ambiguous, like Gawain himself, the border between courts is ironically made more visible. The Third Space is where contrapuntal understandings, both of space and of experiences, can take place. It is a physical space embodying strangeness and occupying neutral ground, but it is also where the worlds of Bertilak and Arthur can be read together and understood as playing off of each other in the forming of a new space and community. Gawain and the Green Knight are the representatives of this community, affected by and with experience of two worlds, but beholden to neither. The Green Knight's role in this space cannot be maintained, however. He is artificially changed by the magic of Morgan La Fey, and when he returns he once again becomes Bertilak and has a home. Bertilak cannot be a part of the contrapuntal nature of the Green Chapel, only one made strange can. Only Gawain receives the permanent ability to exist within the conceptual space of the Green Chapel. His exile allows him a greater understanding even than Arthur, and makes him the greater hero. He joins the two spaces in the third. Instead of keeping them separate forever, Gawain allows for a contrapuntal understanding of two spaces and two cultures.

This theory, grounded in postcolonial interpretations of the interplay between spaces and of Gawain's role as an intermediary between cultures creates a framework from which greater understandings of the text can be founded. Proving that there is a Third Space, represented through the description of the Green Chapel that both separates and defines the courts of Arthur and Bertilak, creates a structure upon which other critical interpretations can be overlaid.

Further, Gawain's role as an exile means that he further illustrates the mediating presence between these ideas and spaces. This application opens *Sir Gawain* to the full range of postcolonial theory. It allows for readings that focus primarily on the relationship between these spaces, how Gawain is made simultaneously made strange from them and yet among them, and what the Green Chapel represents in the new conception.

One notable application of this theory focuses on the historical and cultural implications the text might have. This framework has the potential to provide a new way to view England through the lens of postcolonial theory. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was written before the advent of colonialism and as the conception of the nationhood of England was beginning to take shape. Arthurian legend provides an outlet for this self-conscious conception of England, and therefore *Sir Gawain*'s peculiar spatial and postcolonial aspects are particularly relevant. When considered through this framework, England takes on a new role. Within this text, England is neither a colonizer nor a space exerting power upon another, but is instead one marked by the contrapuntal presence of the Green Chapel and of Gawain himself. Within *Sir Gawain* it is the third space, influenced by the other cultures and yet defined by its difference from either.

Viewing England in these terms offers a perspective not explored in either postcolonial theory or medieval studies. Other medieval texts can be read as containing the same anxieties and provide new insight in how texts grapple with the emerging conception of England as a nation. Similarly, that medieval texts deal with postcolonial issues that place England within a role not ordinarily seen in postcolonial theory allows for a better understanding of how such issues might appear in texts from any era.

Exile is what establishes the link between spaces, cultures, and even theories within *Sir Gawain.* While postcolonialism, the role of interplay, and spatial theory are accepted avenues of criticism, it is Said's idea of the exile that serves to tie them all together. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is unique in that it provides a perfect example of how thoroughly these ideas can be intertwined within a text. Exile as a contrapuntal experience, linking disparate and independent elements, is what serves as the foundation for this understanding of a postcolonial *Sir Gawain.* Further, it provides a renewed relevance for medieval literature and its concepts, allowing contemporary ideas and theories to be applied in ways that have not yet been fully explored.

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