Under Morgan’s Control: The Function of The Lady and The Green Knight

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Introduction

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (SGGK) is an alliterative romance in the late fourteenth century which is based on Arthurian legend. During Christmas season, a knight who is all dressed in green (the Green Knight) suddenly enters King Arthur’s court, and issues a challenge to the knights: one knight will strike off the Green Knight’s head and receive a blow from him after a year and a day. Sir Gawain takes up this challenge and one year later he leaves the court to fulfill the promise with the Green Knight.

One of the hardest ordeals for Gawain in his journey is the temptation the Lady sets, who is Sir Bertilak’s wife. During Bertilak goes out for hunting, the Lady sneaks into Gawain’s bedroom and seduces him to take her love. He parries her temptation for three days, but in the end he takes her green girdle and keep it secret from Bertilak. After that, in the duel with the Green Knight, he reveals the truth to Gawain: He directs his wife to tempt Gawain, and Morgan le Fay in the guise of an old woman in the castle plots all his adventure. Knowing the fact from the Green Knight, Gawain gets angry and casts away the girdle, and he blames himself severely for his fault. He says that it is inevitable that men are deceived by women by listing men’s name such as Adam and Solomon. After that, he refuses to reconcile with the Lady and Morgan and goes back to the court. In fact, Gawain receives the girdle because he loves his life, not because he loves the Lady. In addition, the Green Knight and Arthur’s knights have gentle attitudes toward Gawain’s deed comparatively. Considering these points, Gawain’s wrath and rejection seem to be somewhat exaggerated. He does not have a lover nor does he accept the Lady’s love. It is doubtful what his behavior means in romance, and the female characters’ role as well.¹

On the plot, the most significant character is considered to be Morgan because she is the wirepuller of all the ordeals, as the Green Knight reveals in the last scene. It is poss-
sible that Gawain-poet introduces her into the poem consciously although she does not speak or behave conspicuously like the Green Knight or the Lady. It is because Morgan is actually the master of the castle and has them under her control.

Concerning her role or significance, there have been various opinions among critics. For instance, George L. Kittredge indicates that Morgan is “the ‘only begetter’ of the whole affair” (133). Her plan is unsuccessful because Queen Guinevere is not killed by looking at the Green Knight who looks frightening (132). On the other hand, there are also the interpretations which give her positive meanings such as a healer who gives a warning to the unity of Arthur’s court.

It might be a forced procedure to adopt various Morgan’s image freely from Arthurian legends which spreads widely in order to reconsider her function, as Eiichi Suzuki points out (3). Therefore I will research her figure through two characters the Green Knight / Sir Bertilak and the Lady by focusing on how Gawain-poet describes them.

I. The Lady’s Function in the Temptation Scene

This section will focus on the Lady’s description and function in the temptation scene in the viewpoint of Morgan’s influence. After leaving the court to seek the Green Knight, Gawain finds Bertilak’s castle on the way. Gawain greets Bertilak politely, and he sees Bertilak’s wife (the Lady) and an old woman (Morgan) come together to him. Gawain-poet describes the Lady as follows:

Howatz þe fayrest in felle, of flesche and of lyre,
And of compas and colour and costes, of alle oþer,
And wener þen Wenore, as þe wyse þost.

(943-45 emphasis added)

The first appearance of the Lady is explained comparatively simple. Gawain-poet only refers to her bodily parts roughly, and he compared her with Wenore (Queen Guinevere), who is the standard of medieval beauty. Traditionally, the poets of medieval literatures follows one method when they describes beautiful women (sometimes men). It is head-to-toe descriptio. They watch the object from her (or his) hair, forehead, eyebrows, eyes, cheek, nose, mouth (lips), teeth, and chin, and then mentions head, neck, shoulders, arms, hands, breast, trunk, belly, legs, and feet. Though poets sometimes change this order or skip some parts, they follow this method generally. In this process,
they only mention the object’s external characteristics, not its internal qualities. A good example is shown in the Romaunt of the Rose of Geoffrey Chaucer. I describes a maiden who opens a door of a walled garden as follows:

Hir heer was as yelowe of hewe
As ony basyn scoured newe,
Hir flesh tendre as is a chike,
With bente browis smothe and slyke.
And by mesure large were
The openyng of hir yen clere,
Hir nose of good proporcioun,
Hir yen grey as is a faucoun,
With swete breth and wel savoured,
Hir face whit and wel coloured,
With litel mouth and round to see.
A clove chynne eke hadde she.
Hir nekke was of good fasoun
In lengthe and gretnesse, by resoun,
Withoute bleyne, scabbe, or royne;
Fro Jerusalem unto Burgoyne
Ther nys a fairer nekke, iwys,
To fele how smothe and softe it is;
Hir throte, also whit of hewe
As snowe on braunche snowed newe.
Of body ful wel wrought was she;
Men neded not in no cuntre
A fairer body for to seke.  (The Romaunt of the Rose 539-61)

I describes the maiden’s appearance in detail, and then I shifts her outfit for 23 lines after these reference. In view of this point, Gawain-poet seems to adopt this conventional procedure for the Lady in a simple way. Rather, he takes his original technique into her description by comparing her with Morgan:

For if þe ʒonge watz ʒep, ʒolse watz þat ʒeper;
Riche red on þat on rayled ayquere,
Rugh ronkled chekez þat oþer on rolled;
Kerchofes of þat on, wyth mony cler perlez,
Hir brest and hir bryst þrote bare displayed,
Schon schyrer þen snawe þat schedez on hillez;
Þat oþer wyth a gorger watz gered ouer þe swyre,
Chymbled ouer hir blake chyn with chalkquyte vayles,
Hir frount folden in sylk, enfoubled ayquere,
Toreted and treleted with tryfl ez aboute,
Þat nost watz bare of þat burde bot þe blake broþes,
Þe tweyne yȝen and þe nase, þe naked lyppez,
And þose were soure to se and sellyly blered;

(951-63 emphasis added)

Gawain-poet emphasizes the Lady’s youth and beauty by listing Morgan’s ugliness. In this part, he refers to Morgan’s minute bodily parts such as neck, black chin, black eyebrows, two eyes, nose, and naked lips. In addition to that, Gawain-poet concludes Morgan’s description as follows:

Hir body watz schort and þik,
Hir buttokez balþ and brode, (966-67)

Gawain-poet mentions the lower half of Morgan’s body lastly. From these reference, it is clear that he adopts the traditional method head-to-toe descriptio for Morgan rather than for the Lady. She is just expressed by the typical phrases such as “wener þen Wenore” [more beautiful than Guinevere] and “schyrer þen snawe” [whiter than snow]. Although the Lady is Gawain’s would-be partner in courtly love, her presence in this part seems to be somewhat vague and weak. It is possible that the difference of description between two women makes the audience or readers pay more attention to Morgan unavoidably, and it also alludes to Morgan’s importance in this poem.

Furthermore, the Lady’s beauty is evaluated by Gawain’s viewpoint: “þe wyȝe þost” (945) as opposed to Guinevere’s description which is narrated objectively by Gawain-poet (81-84). He uses Gawain’s individual viewpoint and narrator’s differently throughout the poem. Larry D. Benson regards the individual viewpoint as “limited and dramatic” (186). When Gawain sees the characters, the audience receive the restricted information about them. That suspends the audience’s judgment about who the char-
acters really are or what they mean until the very end of the narrative. In this point, the Lady’s figure is not presented to the audience enough yet. It can be said that the Lady’s obscurity makes Morgan’s presence more outstanding. Furthermore, that Morgan leads the Lady by the left hand seems to suggest that Morgan intends to guide the Lady to the love affairs with Gawain.

In the third fit, the Lady seduces Gawain to take her love during Bertilak goes out for hunting. In this fit, three hunting scenes and three temptation scenes are inserted interchangeably. The temptation scene is mostly consist of the dialogue between Gawain and the Lady. As the Green Knight’s revelation shows, the Lady’s temptation is devised by her husband Bertilak. Therefore, it is doubtful whether she behaves on her will or not, and what her role really is.

In the first temptation, the Lady secretly steals into Gawain’s bedroom, and waits him wakes up. After pondering for a while, Gawain opens his eyes and greets her. The Lady speaks to him as follows:

3e ar a sleper vnslyxe, þat mon may slyde hider;
Now ar se tan as-tyt! Bot true vus may schape,
I schal bynde yow in your bedde, þat be se trayst:
(1209-11 emphasis added)

In this point, the Lady speaks with military terms. The Lady’s words do not go against the tradition of courtly love: a man and his lady establish relations of master to servant in the battlefield of love. According to the ideas of Ovid, which is the origin of courtly love, love is a kind of warfare, and every lover is a soldier. Cupid the god of love is the supreme commander, and women are under him. Men must submit to women absolutely. It is clear that the Lady is well versed in the rules of courtly love, but this time she approaches Gawain so aggressively like a man who originally should struggle to gain a lover. Gawain manages to parry her instruction about love, and consequently she only gives him a hug and a kiss and leaves him. However, Gawain’s challenges in the castle are not completed here. He has to give what he gains to Bertilak, as they contracts. After the first temptation, when Bertilak comes back to the castle, Gawain kisses him “as comlyly as ho couþe awyse” [as courteously as he could devise] (1389). He does not only give what he gets, but also seems to try to imitate how the Lady kisses him: she “Loute lufl ych adoun and þe leude kysse” [she lowers herself courteously and kisses him] (1306). In the second temptation, the Lady kisses Gawain twice. She “comlyly kisses his
face” [she graciously kisses his face] (1505), and “At þe last scho con hym kysse” [in the end she him did kiss] (1555). Then Gawain “hendely hym kysses” [Gawain courteously kisses him] (1639). However, Gawain behaves differently in the third temptation. The Lady kisses Gawain three times, and then he “kysses hym [Bertilak] þrys, / As sauerly and sadly as hem sette couþe” [he kisses Bertilak three times as with relish and vigorously as he could plant them] (1937). Compared to the way the Lady kisses Gawain is the third temptation, his attitude seems to be more aggressive than her. To sum up, as Gawain receives kisses from the Lady, he is brought into female side deeper when he gives kisses to Bertilak. Their relationship seems to be that of courtly love.

In fact, When Gawain comes to Bertilak’s castle, he is “dispoyled” [stripped] (860), and he puts on a flowing robe. Regarding this, Sheila Fisher indicates that Gawain is disarmed, and “he has divested himself of the accoutrements that signify his protected, privileged position within feudal and chivalric codes” (77). Gawain is taught the rules of courtly love from the Lady inversely which she begs him to teach her. It is how to hug and kiss Bertilak in this case. In addition to this, when he leaves Bertilak’s castle for the combat with the Green Knight, he puts on arms with “vertuus stonez” (2027). Gawain does not put this stone when he arrives at the castle for the first time. According to MED, the adjective vertuus is a gemstone with a magical power. From these changes of Gawain’s description, it is possible that he is getting influenced by a woman who has a magical power, that is, he gradually gets feminized by Morgan. Therefore, the Lady is considered to be not only a tempter or would-be lover in the relationship of courtly love, but also a fixer who draw Gawain into a woman’s world and weaken him.

II. The Feminized Man: The Green Knight / Bertilak and Morgan le Fay

It has been a controversial problem for a long time among critics what the Green Knight means. He is a challenger who suddenly enters into Arthur’s court, but it is difficult to understand his figure definitely from his first impression. Concerning his figure, previous scholars discussed from various perspectives. For instance, A. H. Krappe indicates that the Green Knight is “none other than the Lord of Hades, who comes to challenge to a beheading game the heroes sitting around the fire” (211). Laurence Besserman denies his forerunner’s interpretations: a dying and rising vegetation god, an archetypal Death figure, the Devil in disguise, or an allegorical representation of the Word of God or Christ” (220). These interpretations are risen from vague images of Green Knight’s description and his greenness. This section will aim at the precise analy-
sis of his portrait on the text. For convenience, I divide his description into five parts. The following is Green Knight’s description which *Gawain*-poet presents in the first fit.

In part 1 (136-50), *Gawain*-poet explains the Green Knight as “aghlich mayster” [august lord] and “half etayn” [half giant]. The audience or readers receive contradictory images about him from these expressions. The noun *mayster* recalls a lord who rules a party of knights, but *etayn* means a supernatural being such as a giant at the same time. *Gawain*-poet also refers to his bodily parts. As opposed to his stoutness from neck to waist, his paunch and waist are slender. Moreover, all his *fetures* [parts of the body] are *clene* [elegant, fair] in his shape. The words *smale* and *clene* sound ill-matched to the noun *etayn*. In the latter of this part, *Gawain*-poet presents knights’ astonishment at this intruder:

> For wonder of his hwe men hade,  
> Set in his semblaut sene;  
> He ferde as freke were fade,  
> And oueral enker-grene. (147-50)

This passage shows that Arthur’s knights are amazed at his greenness. This first description of the Green Knight seems to give a peculiar impression to Arthur’s court.

In part 2 (151-78), *Gawain*-poet accounts for the Green Knight’s green clothes and his horse. From this part, *Gawain*-poet uses various kinds of adjective such as *meré*, *clene*, *blyþe*, *bryst*, *gay*, and *proude* to explain the gorgeousness of his garments and ornaments. The brightness of green, which is also mentioned in line 150, is emphasized: “And alle his vesture uerayly watz clene verdure” (161 emphasis added). *Gawain*-poet describes the Green Knight’s raiment in detail. He is dressed in beautiful clothes which is adorned with fair gems and embroidery, but he wears no shoes. Regarding his horse, *Gawain*-poet explains its greenness and fidelity to the Green Knight. The notable point in this part is that *Gawain*-poet inserts the narrator’s speculation after he mentions the greenness of the Green Knight and his horse:

> And alle his vesture *uera*ly watz clene verdure,  
> (161 emphasis added)

> Þe fole þat he ferkkes on fyn of þat ilke,  
> *sertayn*, (173-74 emphasis added)
As mentioned above, *Gawain*-poet seems to emphasize the Green Knight’s color by introducing the surprise and suppose of the narrator and Arthur’s knight. In part 3 (179-202), *Gawain*-poet describes the Green Knight’s hair and beard and his horse’s mane and tail. They are decorated or plaited beautifully. *Gawain*-poet refers to their greenness by adding the adjective such as *fayre* and *bryst*. Part 4 (203-31) treats the Green Knight’s array again, but this time it is narrated with relation to battle equipment. He is not clothed in any battle-gear and any weapons. Bearing in mind the barefooted description as mentioned above, the Green Knight with holly branch seems to have no intention to fight. On the other hand, he has a huge and monstrous branch in one hand, which is engraved in elegant designs with green. Even in this part, the Green knight gives complicated images to the audience. In part 5 (232-40), *Gawain*-poet inserts the knights’ thought again:

For vch mon had meruayle quat hit mene myst
Þat a hæbel and a horse myst such a hwe lach,
As growe grene as þe gres and grener hit semed,
Þen grene aumayl on golde glowande bryster.

Forþi for fantoum and fayryþe þe folk þere hit demed.

(233-36, 240)

After a long silence, knights in the court wonders what the color of the Green Knight and his horse means, and then they thinks the Green Knight looks like a “fantoum and fayryþe” [illusion or magic] (240). As shown in line 236 to 37, they depends on the Green Knight’s extraordinary greenness in order to understand his figure.

*Gawain*-poet describes the Green Knight in detail, but he only lists the Green Knight’s external information. This is the method which *Gawain*-poet employs for Morgan rather than the Lady. He makes the Green Knight’s figure ambiguous as well. However, *Gawain*-poet uses this technique for the Green Knight to the utmost degree, not for the Lady and Morgan. Throughout the description, *Gawain*-poet mentions the Green Knight’s bodily part one by one. Even after part 5, *Gawain*-poet refers to the Green Knight’s parts such as red eyes, bristling brow, and beard. Particularly, when the Green Knight receives a blow from Gawain, the Green Knight lays “his longe louelych lokkez” [his long fair lock of hair] (419) over his head, show “þe naked nec” [the naked neck] (420) in readiness. Gawain’s blow sinks the “schyire grece” [bright flesh] (425),
and the “fayre hede” [fair head] (427) falls off to the ground. The Green Knight lifts his “lufuly hed” [fair head] (433) up. From these reference to the bodily parts and the usage of the adjective which signifies the beauty, the Green Knight seems to have elegant and feminine atmosphere. *Gawain*-*poet* adds such adjective for Green Knight’s bodily parts even in the terrifying beheading game. It can be said that this expression might give a distinct impression to the audience and remind them of the looks of a lady who tempts a man. Moreover, there are *Gawain*-poet’s intention in the choice of words: *swyre* and *feture*. He uses *swyre* three times in all throughout the poem, twice for the Green Knight and once for Morgan.\(^5\) *Swyre* means “the neck of a human being” and also “the neck as an object of physical, and esp. of feminine, beauty” according to *MED*. *Feture* is used only twice, once for the Green Knight and once for the Lady in the temptation scene. It is possible that these points seem to suggest the connection between the Green Knight and women.

As mentioned above, it is difficult to define the Green Knight’s greenness because of wide range of its meaning. So it is necessary to reconsider the definition based on the text. In this scene, the knights in Arthur’s court are drawn to his greenness, and they thinks him as an illusion or magic. To sum up, green color seems to be deeply connected with fairy things or witchcraft in this poem. Gawain knows the truth of all his adventure in the last scene of the fourth fit. The Green Knight is actually Bertilak, who is transformed by Morgan’s magic, and he knows about amorous conversation between Gawain and the Lady from the beginning. Furthermore, the Green Knight reveals it is Morgan that plots the adventure to the Arthur’s court. The audience finally know the full view of Gawain’s ordeal in the fourth fit, but *Gawain*-poet in fact suggests Morgan’s influence upon the Green Knight to the audience in as early as the first fit by concealing femininity in his description. His greenness is the sign that suggests he is feminized by Morgan.

### Conclusion

The challengers’ side in this poem, the Green Knight / Sir Bertilak and the Lady are described to take Gawain into one intention of Morgan le Fay. The Lady’s simple description in the first appearance changes her function as a would-be lover or tempter in the love affair of the traditional courtly love, and turns it into a fixer who draws Gawain into women’s world. The Green Knight is a complicated figure as well. He certainly might have the facets of dreadful opponent such as Devil and virtuous lord who watches Arthur’s court fondly as the previous critics indicates. However, the
detailed review of his description discloses that he is also given feminine aspects. His extraordinary greenness which Arthur’s knights pay attention to all the time is caused by illusion or magic, as they judges. These interpretation is linked up with Morgan, who is regarded as both a fairy and a goddess. The Green Knight is assigned not only to test Gawain’s courage but also to guide him to Morgan’s castle, not Bertilak’s. It can be said that the Green Knight / Bertilak and the Lady have the same purpose by Morgan’s command though they appear to impose different ordeal on Gawain.

From these points, Morgan is not an artificial character against what Kittredge indicates. She seems to be quiet in the poem. However, Gawain-poet adopt her into the narrative intentionally, and he emphasizes her presence by hiding her behind the Lady and the Green Knight.

Notes

* All passages of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight are from the edition of Norman Davis, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1967)

1 In this paper, I restrict romance as the narrative which contains the motif of courtly love because the meaning of romance covers a wide field such as family romance or homiletic romance.

 Guenever’s “yzen gray alone eveke the whole stock descrip[tio feminae pulchritudinis with the gray eyes, golden hair, snow-white skin, and delicate limbs that were the conventional marks of literary beauty, as familiar to the audience as to the poet” (Benson 57).


4 According to MED, the adjective which is used for the phrase “whiter than snow” or similar expressions is whit, not shire.

5 Cf. BarnetKottler, and Alan M. Markman. A Concordance to five Middle English poems: Cleaness, St. Erkenwald, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Patience, Pearl. (1966)
Works Cited


