Hybrid Bodies: The Green Knight, Lord Bertilak, and Sir Gawain as Assemblages in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

Until recently, when examining the second title character, scholarship about the fourteenth century poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has focused on either the Knight of the Green Chapel (the Green Knight) or Lord Bertilak of Hautdesert. This may seem fitting given that the two are presented throughout the majority of the text as separate characters, the former being the giant green figure that bursts into King Arthur’s dinner hall on New Years and the latter the hospitable (and seemingly fully-human) aristocrat who houses Sir Gawain and hunts for him. Yet at the end of the final Fitt, a mere 85 lines before the poem’s conclusion, readers discover that the two comprise a single ontology; through the power of the magical Morgan le Fay, he confesses, Bertilak magically transforms into the Green Knight and vice versa. Thus, existing characterizations of either the Green Knight or Lord Bertilak are inherently incomplete.

In this paper, I will explore the hybrid character of the Green Knight/Lord Bertilak (whom I will refer to as “the Green Knight” hereafter to grammatically shorten his name unless analyzing text where he appears exclusively as Lord Bertilak) as well as the greater textual and ecocritical significance of his hybridity. I will argue that the Gawain-poet, the medieval poem’s anonymous author, insists that readers see the Green Knight as hybrid in two ways, first as a being that blurs the ontological line between human and nonhuman and next as a constant embodiment of two performative identities (the Green Knight and

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1 At the Green Chapel, the character, whose physical appearance at this point embodies the Green Knight, says to Sir Gawain, “Bertilak of Hautdesert I am called in this land” (Fitt 4, line 2445).

2 “Morgan the goddess,” Arthur’s half-sister and Gawain’s aunt, is the invisible mastermind behind the poem’s plot (Fitt 4, line 2452). The Green Knight reveals that Morgan sent him to Arthur’s court in order to “have grieved Gaynour” – that is, to kill Queen Guenevere to death, a task which he ultimately does not accomplish (Fitt 4, line 2460). I will return to this idea in my conclusion.
Lord Bertilak). The figure is therefore eternally engaged in a process of flux, simultaneously human and nonhuman as well as Green Knight and Bertilak – always transforming between yet simultaneously embodying both pairs instead of alternating between binary options. Ultimately, the poem’s protagonist Sir Gawain is unable to recognize the constant in-between, ‘becoming’ state of the Green Knight, a state modern ecocritic Jane Bennett would call an assemblage, just like he is unable to recognize his own hybridity.

Many critics have commented on the fact that the Green Knight’s initial appearance as a giant green figure with gold embellishments reveals both wild and courtly elements, highlighting the supposedly-opposing themes of nature and culture. However, more pointedly, rather than embodying opposing themes, the Green Knight unites and confounds them, his vivid coloring revealing his dialectic ontology as a human/nonhuman hybrid. On New Year’s Day in Camelot, the Green Knight suddenly bursts into King Arthur’s dining hall, riding through the doors and shocking the dinner guests. The large and muscular stranger is entirely emerald green, “overall enker-grene” in skin, hair, beard, clothes, and horse (Fitt 1, line 150). His overwhelming coloring ostracizes him from his human counterparts by exposing his otherness; the green being clearly cannot be fully human and instead resembles a strange, nonhuman embodiment of nature. However, his features (besides his enormous size) and actions (such as speaking, walking, and reasoning which I will discuss later) physically resemble those of humans, and most importantly, his greenness is mixed with gold. He wears a beadwork of green in which “the gold ay inmyddes,” green stockings with gold spurs, and plaited golden threads in his “wel cresped and cemmed”

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3 J. A. Burow suggests that the green and gold of the Green Knight’s garb represents his contradictory elements and proves that “he can be in harmony as well as out of harmony with the court on which he intrudes” (16). William Goldhurst similarly argues that the “Green Knight is Nature, to be sure, but he is as well a representative of the high civilization, the sophistication, the man-made artificiality of the court” (62).

4 Many scholars have explored the character’s greenness and have suggested that his coloring identifies him with nature/the natural realm. See Lawrence Besserman’s “The Idea of the Green Knight,” Michael George’s “Gawain’s Struggle with Ecology: Attitudes toward the Natural World in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” and Gillian Rudd’s “Being Green in Late Medieval English Literature” for further scholarship.

5 Scholars have suggested that the Green Knight serves as a representation of a medieval Green Man, yet in her essay “The Green Knight’s Balancing Act,” Gillian Rudd points out that he “lacks the defining feature, that of being made up of vegetation” (34). Still though, “in being presented with a figure who is similar to, but explicitly not the Green Man, we are forced to ask what exactly he is – the very question that preoccupies the assembled lords and ladies at Arthur’s court.”
green hair (Fitt 1, lines 167, 188). His lavish gold embellishments and ermine fur coat indicate a conscious concern and effort to look presentable and well-dressed according to a cultural code – perhaps not that of Camelot where knights do not streak their hair with gold, but a set of societal standards nonetheless. Furthermore, while he lacks traditional knightly wartime attire (helmet, hauberck, neck-armor, arm plates, spear, and shield), he admits to owning it, proving that the Green Knight and the Arthurian knights share a common idea of knighthood. So while the Green Knight intrudes on Arthur’s court, his goldness reveals that he intrudes from somewhere, a society and culture different from yet similar to Camelot, and it posits him as a cultured figure. Concurrently, his vivid greenness links him with nature and signals an apparent nonhumanness. In the Gawain-poet’s initial description, neither color dominates, but rather they work in tandem as evidenced by the following lines: “That a hathel and a horse might such a hwe lach / As growe gren as the gres and greener hit semed, / Then grene aumayl on golde glowande bryghter” (Fitt 1, lines 234-236). The green and gold do not contrast but interact with each other, existing in glowing balance and signifying the Green Knight’s simultaneous human/nonhuman hybridity.

The Green Knight’s symbolic possessions further highlight his hybrid ontology by blurring the boundary between the nonhuman and human, and because he holds certain objects, puts them down, and picks up new ones, his possessions exist in flux and serve as a perfect microcosm for their possessor. He initially bears a holly branch and an axe, the former a sign of peace and the latter a gift to anyone who wins his Christmas beheading game. Upon analysis, the objects refute their seemingly-simple interpretations of nonhuman nature and human culture, respectively – as Gillian Rudd says in “The Green Knight’s Balancing Act,” a “manmade tool contrasted with the naturally growing branch it is designed to

6 Interestingly, in Lord Bertilak’s initial descriptions, a fiery lexicon dominates: a fire burns in the castle hall, his beard is reddish-brown, and his face is “felle…as the fyre” (Fitt 2, line 847). The red imagery visually contrasts with the Green Knight’s vivid greenness especially given that the two colors are complementary. It would be interesting to place the differing initial descriptions of the Green Knight and Bertilak in conversation with medieval scholarship about the elements of earth and fire and to consider what significance these representations held for the character and the text.

7 The Green Knight says to Arthur: “Ye may be seker bi this braunch that I bere here / That I passe as in pes, and no plight seche” (Fitt 1, lines 265-266)
hew” (27). While the holly branch is indeed from nature, the Green Knight ascribes it an allegorical
meaning (to signify peace) in Arthur’s court, a social setting; thus, he appropriates onto nature and draws
the branch into the realm of human culture. Similarly, while the axe is clearly manmade, it is the tool of
the Green Knight’s beheading game which is utterly strange to the Arthurian court. As a familiar object
used for a foreign purpose, the battle-axe epitomizes the cultural clashing between the human court and
the hybrid Green Knight. Furthermore, by the sheer fact that it belongs to a hybrid, the axe is torn out of
the human realm; readers can only speculate how the knight used the axe outside of the poem’s plot.
Therefore, the Green Knight’s holly branch and axe display his attempts to appropriate humanness onto
nature and posit him both inside and outside the human realm as a cultural body nonetheless foreign to
Arthurian society. Like the figure that grips them, they confound the boundary between nature and
culture, nonhuman and human, and it seems no coincidence that they themselves are green and gold.
Ultimately, however, the Green Knight gives the axe to Gawain, and he exits the hall instead holding the
holly and his own severed head, a thing which paradoxically seems equally object and human. The Green
Knight’s possessions thus do not serve as static extensions of the figure as Rudd suggests, but rather as
elements changing in flux which constantly embody both the human and nonhuman.

Moreover, during his interaction throughout the first Fitt with the court, the hybrid demonstrates
his transforming ontology by acting simultaneously human and nonhuman, confusing the Arthurian
knights who interact with him as if he was human. While the beheading game appears to be, in Arthur’s
translated words, absurd folly, the Green Knight nonetheless requests to play it seriously and
wholeheartedly. He views beheading as a game since he can survive decapitation and is clearly
nonhuman; although his flesh tears, his bones break, and his body bleeds red blood, he survives Gawain’s

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8 King Arthur says to the Green Knight: “Hathel, by heven, thy asking is nys, / And as thou foly hatz frayst, fynde
the behoves” (Fitt 1, lines 323-324).
9 The holly branch and axe fit Donald Howard’s idea that “everywhere in [Sir Gawain and the Green Knight] is
balance, contrast, and antithesis. Things are arranged in pairs… [and] these intricacies are unobtrusively integrated
with events and themes” (425). However, like I do in my argument, Howard does not stress the increased
importance of balance (more specifically, of fluid, moving balance) both to the character and the poem.
10 Referring to the description of Green Knight with his possessions in Fitt 1, Rudd writes that “it is easy to see
where the presumption of static balance comes in. The passage reminds us of symmetrically balanced scales” (28).
This reading would suggest viewing the possessions as well as the Green Knight as binaries instead of constantly
transforming.
eventual blow in two pieces. In the same scene, however, he uses rhetoric to successfully convince Gawain (who is indeed mortal) to accept his fatal challenge. His advanced speech, which continues even after his head violently splits from his body, posits him as a speaking, logical human, and he thus performs both human and nonhuman actions simultaneously. Furthermore, in their dialogue throughout the Fitt, while the Arthurian citizens look at the Green Knight in fear because of his otherness (“for doute,” Fitt 1, line 246), they interact with him human-to-human (“for cortaysye,” Fitt 1, line 247), abiding by social conventions such as utilizing “sir,” exchanging names, and even, on Arthur’s part, extending a dinner invitation. Therefore, the Gawain-poet presents a character who seems both supernatural immortal and courtly human, a green hybrid that articulately reasons with cultured knights why someone should chop off his head. His interaction with the Arthurian court perfectly resembles human dialogue, yet his words and actions concurrently reveal his nonhumanness; it is apparent as he exits the hall, his bodily trunk riding majestically atop his horse with his speaking head in hand, that the Green Knight is simultaneously human and nonhuman, constantly transforming between the two in a perpetual state of ‘becoming.’

Furthermore, in the same Fitt, the Gawain-poet uses a whopping twelve different terms to describe the Green Knight, revealing the poet’s intention to present the character to readers as a constantly-transforming hybrid. Interestingly, before he even enters Arthur’s hall, the Green Knight is characterized by the Gawain-poet by the noise of his approaching: “An other noyse ful newe neghed bilive” (Fitt 1, line 132). While “an other noyse” has been translated by some to “another noise” (that is, noise besides the music of line 118’s “noble pipes”), it can also be translated as “an other noise,” suggesting the mere sounds of the Green Knight are “other” and “ful newe” – different, unlike those produced or recognized by the Arthurian court. After the Green Knight arrives, the Gawain-poet expounds this initial characterization by using varying and opposing language to confound the green figure’s identity and stress his hybrid ontology. The medieval poet uses twelve terms throughout Fitt 1 when describing the Green Knight, displayed in the following table along with their translations according to James Finny:
The Gawain-poet’s titles sharply contradict each other\textsuperscript{12}; readers appropriately question whether the Green Knight is a “gome” or “half etayn,” a “mon” or an “aghlich mayster”? Instead of marking the Gawain-poet’s inability to accurately describe the Green Knight, the contradictory and puzzling diction displays the writer’s conscious desire to depict the character as such – contradictory and puzzling. The terms have differing ontological significations (human “gome” vs. nonhuman “etayn”) as well as linguistic connotations (negative “aghlich mayster” vs. positive “knyght”). Just as the knights in Arthur’s court stare at the figure “with al the wonder of the worlde” marveling at his strange greenness interspersed with gold, readers ponder over his blurry ontology that seems “ful newe” (Fitt 1, line 238). Ultimately, the terms do not negate each other but rather compound and pile up to provide a more complex (and paradoxically more accurate) representation of the Green Knight. The Gawain-poet thus signals to readers the fluidity and flux of the Green Knight’s transforming hybridity, grammatically manifesting it into the text through his language.

In addition to being a transforming human and nonhuman hybrid, the character also constantly embodies two performative identities, the Green Knight and Lord Bertilak. While he physically appears

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\textbf{Middle English Term} & \textbf{Modern Translation} & \textbf{Line in Fitt 1} \\
(Gawain-poet) & (James Finny) & \\
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aghlich mayster & terrible figure & 136 \\
half etayn & half a giant & 140 \\
freke\textsuperscript{11} & he; rider; man & 149; 196; 430 \\
gome & man & 151; 178; 179; 405 \\
sturne & grim man & 214 \\
hathel & giant; knight; man & 221; 234; 256; 309 \\
renk & man & 303 \\
mon & man & 322; 332; \\
knyght & knight & 377; 390; 417; 454 \\
other & other man & 386 \\
grene & green man & 464 \\
mervayl & wonder & 466 \\
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\textsuperscript{11} Rudd reminds readers that, according to the \textit{Middle English Dictionary}, this word “already [carried] connotations of strangeness, particularly strangeness associated with great size” at the time of the Gawain-poet (35).

\textsuperscript{12} In “A Note on Some Words,” Finny speculates that the Gawain-poet used differing terms to describe the Green Knight in order to keep the verse’s alliteration, yet “a translator must fear that he is missing some shade of meaning that would have been apparent to a medieval audience” (155).

\textsuperscript{13} Rudd notes that the Gawain-poet’s phrase “half etayn in erde” both characterizes the Green Knight as nonhuman and reminds readers that “we are on Erth, in Arthur’s court” which ultimately “offers the notion of a poet who revels in the idea of a half-giant in the real world and rather wishes it could be true” (27).
in the text as either one or the other, either green and gold hybrid or courtly red aristocrat, his actions are
tellingly consistent throughout the poem. These actions prove that he is one ontological being who is
constantly becoming, a living flux of both human and nonhuman traits as well as two different identities
with respective physical appearances\textsuperscript{14} - a perpetually-transforming hybrid. In the poem, he utilizes legal
diction while making covenants with Sir Gawain both in Arthur’s court appearing as the Green Knight
and in his castle in Hautdesert as Lord Bertilak. In the former example, the Green Knight clearly and
thoroughly explains the beheading game before the court and asks Gawain to repeat it after his self-
nomination (“thou hatz redily rehearsed, bi resound ful trwe, / Clanly al the covenant that I the kynge
asked,” Fitt 1, lines 392-393), thereby ensuring that Gawain understands the terms to the “covenant”
before proceeding. Likewise, in the latter instance, Bertilak proposes an agreement, a “forwarde,” with
Gawain to exchange his hunting earnings for Gawain’s daily mishaps, a deal that they seal with drinks
(Fitt 2, line 1105). While his tone is more relaxed at Hautdesert, the figure utilizes several conditional
‘if/then’ statements and heavily employs the word “sir” in both situations. His habits remain the same
despite his changing exterior, and the character’s reliance on covenants and consistent legal diction as
both the Green Knight and Lord Bertilak prove his singular, transforming, and hybrid ontology.

The Green Knight’s love of beheading games works similarly to reveal his ontology. As readers
first meet the character on New Year’s Day, he insists on playing a Christmas game, a “Crystemas
gomen,” offering one man a strike at his head in return for a blow one year and a day later (Fitt 1, line
283). Likewise, after Gawain’s first dinner at Hautdesert, Lord Bertilak plays a game by mounting his
hood on a spear and asking others to retrieve it. While obviously less violent, the latter “gomnez in halle”
echoes the beheading game both in dining hall setting and purpose of giving the Christmas season the

\textsuperscript{14} In discussing the figure’s human/nonhuman hybridity, I have cited examples occurring when he embodies the
Green Knight. I do not wish to suggest that only the Green Knight (and not Lord Bertilak) is a human/nonhuman
hybrid; indeed as Larry Benson points out, when the “Green Knight takes the shape of Lord Bertilak he continues to
act with ‘churlish vigor’” (94). Yet, this line of thinking is fruitless since the figure cannot be reduced to two
separate halves; he is, to use Jane Bennett’s term which I will later explore, an assemblage of heterogeneous
elements (including his transforming physical appearance/performative identity) in which the sum (his ontology) is
greater than the parts. Interestingly, it is nearly impossible to accurately represent the figure through language since
“the Green Knight/Lord Bertilak” implies a division between the two, and yet he otherwise remains nameless. In
any case, he confounds human linguistic boundaries.
“most myrthe” (Fitt 2, lines 989, 985)\. Moreover, Lord Bertilak later presents Gawain with a boar’s head on a spear, a token from the day’s hunting trip, which the two then “hondeled…[and] prayed, / And let lodly therat the lorde for to here” (Fitt 3, lines 1633-1634)\. The various beheadings constitute another action that both the Green Knight and Lord Bertilak consistently perform, thus offering further proof of that the two identities comprise one singular being.

As a perpetually-transforming hybrid, the Green Knight can easily be analyzed using Jane Bennett’s theory of assemblages from her work *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, and by analyzing the medieval character through a modern philosophical lens, readers gain a fuller understanding of both the fourteenth-century text as well as present-day ecocriticism. Assemblages are, according to Bennett, “ad hoc groupings of diverse elements…living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within” (23-24). The slippery term thus describes a “material cluster” of heterogeneous parts, both human and nonhuman as well as physical and metaphysical, that compose a “non-totalizable sum” in which the parts are constantly in flux, changing in relation to each other or, as Bennett says, “jelling” (24). As an assemblage, the Green Knight figure comprises many parts – the appearance of the Green Knight, greenness, gold embellishments, giant size, human skin and features, holly branch, axe, speech, rhetoric, immortality, the ability to act courtly in King Arthur’s court, the appearance of Lord Bertilak, redness, aristocratic hunting knowledge\(^1\), a tendency to speak in legal terms, an affinity for beheading games, etc. These various,

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^15^ Finny notes that the Gawain-poet employs many variations of the word ‘game’ throughout the poem. “A reader who keeps an eye on the Middle English text will recognize how frequently the word occurs, together with other terms appropriate to the midwinter festival – *bourdez, laghter, layke, japez, joye, myry, play* – and to the series of practical jokes played on Gawain” (156).

^16^ These lines are ironic since they place both characters on the same religious plane. First, they show Gawain, a highly religious man, praising a false idol (a boar’s head) for the Lord to hear. Gawain acts overzealously presumably out of respect for Bertilak’s hospitality and out of shame for accepting Lady Bertilak’s kisses a few hours earlier, but I cannot imagine that he would do the same blasphemous act in Camelot. It is interesting then that in Hautdesert – that is, a new culture – Gawain’s morals crumble and his actions differ. Second, the lines present Lord Bertilak in a religious light (giving praise though it be to a pagan god). Thus, the aristocrat conforms to certain religious customs (the same ones as Gawain in this situation) which contrasts the Green Knight’s representation as “devilish” (Gawain’s word, Fitt 4, line 2192). It would be interesting to further study how religion both unites and divides the Greek Knight and Lord Bertilak figure.

^17^ For more about how well Lord Bertilak followed medieval aristocratic hunting practices, see Michael Twomey’s “How Green Was the Green Knight? Forest Ecology at Hautdesert.”
heterogeneous parts, are constantly in flux, changing in relation to one another – that is, as some gain dominance, others lose strength. This explains how the Green Knight can act courtly in King Arthur’s hall while appearing as a green giant, calmly speaking and reasoning even after his head is chopped off, and later embody the seemingly-fully-human Lord Bertilak. The Green Knight can thus be imagined as a swarm of materialities, a non-totalizable sum whose hybrid ontology is greater than that of its individual, jelling parts 18.

In the poem, Sir Gawain is unable to recognize the “other” and “ful newe” figure as an assemblage just as he is unable to recognize himself as an assemblage. In Arthur’s hall, Gawain asks the Green Knight: “Where is thy place? / I wot never where thou wonyes, bi hym that me wroght, / Ne I know not the, knyght, thy cort ne thi name” (Fitt 1, lines 398-400). Interestingly, Gawain calls him “thou” and “knyght,” asks him his “cort” and “name,” and even invokes God ("hym that me wroght"), relying on several cultural constructions in his dialogue and thereby interacting with the Green Knight as if the green giant is fully human and equally as cultured. Yet, he knows that the figure is not; as Gawain rides to the Green Chapel, the Green Knight’s dwelling-place, in the fourth Fitt, he characterizes his beheading counterpart as “the dele,” utilizing a satanic description out of fear both for his life and in the face of the unknown (Fitt 4, line 2188). And while the Green Knight is “develez” to Gawain, the Green Chapel, is “ugly,” “a chapel of meschaunce,” and “the corsedest kyrk that ever I com inne” (Fitt 4, lines 2192, 2195, 2196). Gawain’s monologue in Fitt 4, lines 2185-2211, shows him not only representing his unfamiliar surroundings in terms of religion, but also attempting to uphold his own knighthood 19.

Tellingly, once he is removed from Camelot and posited, he himself, as an ‘other’ in unfamiliar territory, Gawain clings to his culturally-defined constructs of religion and knighthood as if his identity would

18 Several scholars have independently drawn conclusions about the Green Knight character similar to my argument that he is an assemblage. Besserman notes that “the Green Knight accommodates a cluster of antithetical attributes – ferocity and restraint, courtesy and rudeness, mastery and subservience, courtly artifice and natural wilderness – that are in constant dynamic play” (227-228). Similarly, Rudd notes that he embodies a “kind of balance [which] prevents any one element achieving lasting dominance because the very process of gaining ascendancy creates a consequence…which redresses that success” (29).
19 “‘Bi Godde,’ quoth Gawayn, ‘that gere, as I trowe, / Is ryched at the reverence me, renk, to mete / bi rote. / Let God worche! “We loo” / Hit helppez me not a mote. / My lif thigh I forgo, / Drede dotz me no lote’” (Fitt 4, lines 2205-2211).
crumble without them. His speech thus displays deep-seated anxiety not only of the Green Knight, a being whose ontology he fails to understand, but also of the potential for his own identity. Alas, Gawain’s limited self-perception reveals that he is unable to recognize himself as an assemblage, a non-totalizable sum that could still be brave and courageous without being a “knight” and could view the unknown as just that, unknown, instead of satanic. Gawain enacts “limitations in human-centered theories” of thinking (a variation of Bennett’s theories of action) (24).

Ultimately, the medieval characters of the Gawain-poet’s text enhance Bennett’s ecocritical theory by demonstrating the importance of perceiving the self as an assemblage. Like the Green Knight and Sir Gawain show us, whether or not we are conscious of it, we are all assemblages – hybrid bodies composed of human, nonhuman, physical, and metaphysical materiality that is constantly becoming, transforming, and jelling. It is within our power to recognize our own hybridity, to choose to strengthen certain parts as we see fit, and to avoid the type of anxiety that Gawain experiences once his self-perception begins to wobble and topple without its cultural supports. Perhaps, in this Arthurian tale, the Gawain-poet’s central aim was in fact to explore the possibilities of the self, to reimagine the individual in a manner similar to Bennett, by presenting medieval readers with a unique character who ultimately remains a “mervayl,” the poet’s last term in Fitt 1 to describe him.

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20 Referring to the wilderness of Wirral, George notes that to Gawain, “regions without civilization are hostile, in need of domination. His physical salvation is civilized habitation” (36). While he argues that Gawain reacts by trying to conquer nature with “militaristic dominance,” I would argue that, like at the Green Chapel, the Wirral scene presents Gawain in the midst of an identity crisis, attributing hostility onto his natural surroundings due to his mental anxiety about the potential he feels outside of the court to recreate himself and change his self-perception (30).

21 Winny states that the Green Knight’s following of Morgan le Fay’s orders “is a blemish on an otherwise perfect story” since the Gawain-poet does not describe Guenevere’s reaction to the Green Knight in Fitt 1 while Morgan’s goal is to kill her (153). Winny concludes that the “poet’s reasons for introducing this unconvincing last minute surprise are hard to fathom” (154). In an otherwise complicated yet seamless plot, the Gawain-poet’s blemish is surprising, and I suggest that the poet included Morgan le Fay in order to make the Green Knight’s physical transformations possible through magic. While not entirely realistic, this interpretation of the poet’s intentions shows that he or she consciously chose to represent the character as an ontological hybrid, revealing a greater intention of reimagining the self.