중세르네상스영문학
24권 1호 (2016): 17-35

The Benign but Bleak "wyldrenesse" in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

Francis K. H. So
Kaohsiung Medical University

Toward the close of the sixteenth century Shakespeare created a green world in his romantic comedies celebrating "the triumph of life and love over the waste land" (Frye 182).[1] Alternatively he is said to have filled that world "with the symbolism of the victory of summer over winter" (Frye 183). Seemingly, forests in Shakespeare's time were miraculously converted into a green world. Corollary, England in the earlier age should have a more extensive green landscape. However, contrary to our imagination, medieval England had much less woodland, including primeval forests, than other European countries. Records of the *Domesday Book* compiled in AD 1086 show that England's woodland, including parts of Wales and Cumbria, occupied only 15 percent of its land. The figure was substantially

[1] The term "green world" was first coined by Northrop Frye in his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957). In recent years eco-critics were drawn to the term. Among various works, Leah Knight's *Reading Green in Early Modern England* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014) is particularly noteworthy in that it encompasses the use of green in natural and domestic environment, including gardens, home and in literary works.

scaled down by the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (Rackham 15). Nevertheless, new woods, particularly after the Black Death, sometimes grew up (Rackham 21) because depopulation saved the woods. In principle, most lands in medieval England were cultivated and those classified as grown with "seminatural vegetation" were either used or owned. Rarely were there unclaimed wild forests, woodlands and deserted land. Even "moorland, too, was fully used as pasture and for digging peat for fuel, either domestic or for the mines that flourished in mountain areas" (Rickham 27). Practically no land was left without some owner. It is with this backdrop that we shall probe into the Gawain-poet's empirical and imaginary landscape in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, focusing on the unique wilderness of Wirale.

When the one year term is up, Sir Gawain leaves Arthur's court to seek for the Green Knight at the Green Chapel. Drearily and without attendants[2] he passes by the "frythez and dounez" without a single soul but God to talk with. Thus sets the tone of Gawain's solitary journey. This adventure does not have the excitement of a treasure hunt or the honor of chaperoning a noble lady but is an occasion of certain death. Once riding close to North Wales he tremulously enters into the

> wyldrenesse of Wyrale; wonde þer bot lyte
> Þat auþer God oÞer gome wyth goud hert louied.
> And ay he frayned, as he ferde, at frekez þat he met,
> If þay hade herde any karp of a kny3t grene,
> In any grounde þeraboute, of þe grene chapel.
> (Tolkien, Gordan and Davies *SGGK* ll.701-705)

[2] I took advantage of Professor Ad Putter's interpreting "ledeles" as "without attendants" rather than the traditional gloss of "without companions." See Ad Putter and Myra Stokes ed. *The Works of the Gawain Poet: Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, Cleanness, Patience* (London: Penguin, 2014), p. 302n 693.

This scene capitalizes on the "wyldrenesse of Wyrale" to reveal the unfriendly vista and it tells much more than appeared on the surface. The intriguing landmark so labeled is geographically real and its specificity has long ago warranted a gloss in the Tolkien-Gordon and Davis edition of *SGGK*:

> Wirral was made into a forest by Ranulph le Meschin ('the young'), fourth earl of Chester (d. c. 1129), and remained wild as late as the sixteenth century (G. Ormerod, *History of the County Palatine and City of Chester*, revd. T. Helsby (London, 1882), ii.353-4). H. L. Savage gives evidence of the concern caused to the authorities in the fourteenth century by criminals who resorted there (*M.L.N.* xlvi (1931), 455-7). (Tolkien p. 98 n701)

Of all the unruly geographical locations mentioned in the poem, "Wyrale" is the only venue that is explicitly named a wilderness. Its treatment with an authentic place-name rather than a fictitious one must serve some specific purpose. Historical record indicates that Ranulf le Meschin, the 3rd Earl of Chester (1070—1129)[3] has converted this frontier facing the Welsh Marches known as the Wirral from the previous crown-owned area into a hunting forest nurturing wild beasts and animals. The Gawain-poet probably refers the land to this afforested period rather than to the earlier practically uninhabited locale and hence Gawain would have the desolate feeling. Close to the Gawain-poet's time, the area has been pestered by criminals that posed peril to the lone traveler. Though a

[3] Among other things, the Beeston Castle in Chester was built or rebuilt by Ranulf as noted by the Tudor traveler John Leland in 1546 in his description of the county. See John Chandler, *John Leland's Itinerary: Travels in Tudor England* (Thrupp, Stroud, Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 1998), p.55. That the Tolkien gloss puts Ranulph le Meschin as the fourth earl of Chester is probably an anachronism because the fourth earl of Chester was Ranulf II (also known as Ranulf de Gernons, 1129-1153). See H. A. Cronne, "Ranulf De Gernons, Earl of Chester, 1129 – 1153." *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* (Fourth Series), 20 (1937):103-134. doi:10.2307/3678595.

knight, Gawain must be cautious not to fall prey to armed bandits, gangsters and other kinds of outlaws. What the Gawain-poet says "wonde þer bot lyte/ þat auþer God oþer gome wyth goud hert louied" means the area was not normally trodden, and has become a hiding place for unwelcome persons. Traveling through this part of the wild world cannot be enjoyable.

As the Wirral was not a mythical area but a geographically real one it would have some traceable physical features. Down to the first half of the sixteenth century (c. 1543-44), a relatively comprehensive picture of its topography and environments has been recorded by the great Tudor traveler and antiquarian John Leland who has given us a proximity look of the geography and archaeological remains of the area:

> Wirral begins less than a quarter-mile from the city of Chester itself, not two bow-shots from the suburb outside the north gate. Here a small stream called Flokars Brook flows into the River Dee, and there is a basin known as Porte Poole sufficient to hold a ship at spring tide. A half-mile downstream is Blacon Head, a kind of peninsula, where there is a former residence of Sir William Norris. . . .
>
> Continuing a mile down the Dee there is a small village close to the bank called Saughall, and less than a mile lower is Crabwall. Then a further mile, right on the shore, is the royal castle of Shotwick, with a park adjoining; Shotwick village is three-quarters of a mile beyond. Two miles lower there is an anchorage in the estuary called Salthouse Roads, which corresponds to a salterne cottage on the shore. At Burton Head, almost a mile further, is a village, and two miles lower is Denhall Roads, offshore from a farmhouse called Denhall Hall . . . and Denhall village, which lies further inland. Rather more than two miles beyond Denhall is Neston Roads, with Neston village a mile inland, and then three miles further is the Red Bank, corresponding to the village of Thurstaston, a half-mile inland. West Kirby village, however, more than a mile beyond, is right on the shore, and is only a half-mile from Hilbre, the extreme point of Wirral. (Chandler pp. 53-54)

Basically the land is infertile, sparsely populated with occasional houses scattered apart and the land is not too far from the shore. There were roads running through the district leading to villages that were miles apart. While economic activities were not detailed, salt making was mentioned which means there were manufacturing laborers rather than farmers on the land and the area was close to saline water as well as fresh water. This description guaranteed that there would be human activities in some parts of the wilderness though not necessarily thriving. Else, a park adjacent to the castle is described. This was not unusual at the time for "pleasure parks attached to royal residences, to the homes of the very wealthy, and to some monasteries" (Howes 195). Private parks with wood pasture, similar to forests, in medieval England "symbolized aristocratic status down to the level of minor gentry" (Rickham 22) and they were prohibitive to common people. Allowing the credit of two hundred years of economic development, the Wirral in the sixteenth century would still have to be taken as a stretch of wild woodland or holt and heath with pockets of villages not congenial to pleasure travel nor was it flourished with entertaining sight of vegetation. In fact, close to the Gawain-Poet's time, wilderness has similar descriptions in *The Mabinogion*. The Welsh narrative describes the "wilderness" as fundamentally undesirable and unpleasant. In one of the better known tales, having met some knights passing by his domicile, the young Peredur (Welsh name for Perceval) decided to leave his mother to follow the knights:

> And he set out on his way, with a handful of sharp-pointed darts in his hand. And two nights and two days was he traveling desert and wilderness, without meat, without drink. And then he came to a great desolate forest . . . . ("Peredur Son of Efrawg" 185)
> 'By my faith,' said Arthur, 'I will search the wilderness of the Island of Britain for him [Peredur] till I find him. And then let each of them do his worst to the other.' ('Peredur Son of Efrawg" 194)

The wilderness that Peredur came across was quite like the one that Sir Gawain finds himself in. If the Peredur's wilderness is likened to a desert and inhospitable land which has no sustenance means the one that Gawain traversed is equally wild and even perilous. It pinpoints to some of the remotest spots in England. If it is not, neither Gawain nor Arthur would need to take the trouble to search far and wide for it and if it were close to civilized communities words could easily pass out to it and be reported back the traces or trails of the Green Knight. But its distance from civilization is not the most important factor though it does concern a knight who is used to live in courtly style. The topography certainly defines the locale to be away from the hurly-burly festive activities and removed from the boisterous Arthurian court fashion. Using the eco-critical approach to the poem Gillian Rudd remarked that the Green Knight and its search embodies "the powers of nature interrupting the rituals of culture" (Rudd 52). The present wilderness supports such viewpoint. For Gawain who has been accustomed to the fanfare of court culture, finding himself in a wilderness can be traumatic. To be close to nature is to be largely alienated from human vanities, including chivalric pastime. Else, this lonesome passage through the wilderness records a crucial part of his helpless wandering, having no meat, drink and other amenities that he is familiar with. This is not the habit of his daily life. Sir Orfeo, for another, has similar kind of heart-rending exilic feeling when preparing to go into a wilderness.

> For now ichaue mi quen ylore,
> þe fairest leuedi þat ever was bore,
> Neuer eft y nil no woman se.
> Into wildernes ichil te
> And liue þer euer-more
> Wiþ wilde bestes in holtes hore. (Bliss *Sir Orfeo* ll.209-14)

> þurth wode and ouer heþ
> Into þe wildernes he geþ.
> Noþing he fint þat him is ays,
> Bot euer he liveþ in gret malais. (ll. 237-40)

In the two occasions cited above, wilderness is the equivalent of "holtes hore," or ancient forests with wild beasts. When Orfeo actually leaves the court to live in the wilderness, the place is nothing more than woods and heath, similar to what Gawain confronted in *SGGK*, with no sense of comfort. In it, Orfeo has to suffer involuntarily. The venue signifies a place where Orfeo found himself a desperate and downcast man. What Peredur and Orfeo experience bears the same feeling that Gawain faces while journeying through the desolate district. In either situation, the wilderness brings forth a drastic change of living standard from communal revels to solitary distress and bleak hope in life.

It has been alerted that one should not take the Wirral as what the present day American conservationists will imagine it to be the "primordial virgin wilderness." One has to see it with the perspective of medieval Europe and hence

> The Wirral is thus finely balanced between actual geographical place and archetypal forest of romance text: a place of personal trial, unexpected ambush, marauders, honest and dishonest men outlawed, hermits, and wild animals. Significantly, the animals appear in both actual and conceptual forests, as in each case part of the purpose of forest was to provide an environment for hunt beasts, whether those beasts were themselves purely actual or primarily symbolic (Rudd 57-58).

In that light, we have to take the Wirral not as a primitive desert or forest but "a place of personal trial" and "unexpected ambush." Yet, despite Gawain's uneasiness in this lonesome passage, the wilderness does

not end here. It is merely the turning point of his hard journey charted as a forest once made by the earl of Chester. This landscape or space (presuming to remain quite the same in the fourteenth century) has to be viewed "processionally, sequentially, rather than all at once and from a particular vantage point" (Howes 193). Therefore, Gawain's ongoing movements across the landscape substantiates that the "plot developments coincide with changes in place" (Howes 202). The few people he chanced to enquire the whereabouts of the Green Knight seemed to be ignorant villagers or uninformed passers-by or nonchalant traveling knights. This manifests Gawain's leaving the cultured communities, including Camelot, and goes into an uncivilized and unknown world. With repeated disappointment on the way the landscape becomes doubly frustrating; both because of the dreary ambience and of the dampening responses from passers-by. Riding obsessively, he passes through the wilderness, encountering the "gates straunge," "bonk vnbene," "klyf," "warþe oþer water," "knarrez," and "naked rokkez" which make up "bi contray". Thus the wilderness is not treated as a fixed or static object, but a processing of parts, each of which imposes with oppressive physical features. All these scenes contribute to the "pedestrian logic" of the poem, that is, they are "connected by Gawain's travel among them" (Howes 203).

Gawain's onward unaccompanied ride has not lost sight of the wilderness entirely. The familiar Camelot provides him with a public space while the wilderness an unacquainted private environment.[4] The court shapes him a Round Table knight, that is a type, while the wilderness renders him an individual. The latter situation applies to him much as it is to Peredur and Orfeo. In the private space, Gawain finds freedom but also danger (Spearing 138). As an individual knight he is in search of

[4] The idea of public and private space, in this case, the court and the forest and wilderness has been aptly treated by A. C. Spearing in "Public and Private Spaces in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.*" *Arthuriana*, 4.2 (Summer 1994):138-145.

egocentric satisfaction and has to exercise independent habit of tackling hardships. The various landmarks and the disconcerting answers all contribute to his hardships and awareness of a new identity.

On the surface, the wilderness isolates Gawain's ego and evinces the anti-climax of his chivalric activities. But his choice is voluntary, unlike that of Lancelot in *Morte Darthur* when banished by order of Guenevere. Suddenly, Gawain's valor, strength, courteousness, integrity and even moral courage have nowhere to relate to. Even Gringolet which at the time of departure receives exquisite description becomes numb and inconspicuous. It seems that the silence of the wilderness has devoured the boisterous Arthurian court. Arthur's created world of civilization has dwindled to becoming absorbed by the hostile ancient world of God forsaken land. Regretfully, Gawain's life-cycle in the wilderness now takes a turn leading to his visit to the Hautdesert Castle. To maintain the integrity and fame of Arthur's court, his "journey is not simply a triumph for his inner city but a transformation; only through transgression, only in encountering the wilderness, can civilized values be defined and their limits understood" (Spearing 139). Clearly the anti-climactic riding through the Wirral dawns on Gawain certain awareness of values that his fellow Arthurian knights cannot perceive.

Furthermore, the extended hostilities of the wilderness arouse Gawain's perseverance and patience. Yet, his agonies do not occupy much of the narration which has only four lines (ll. 720-23) on his battling with serpents, wolves, wild men, bulls, bears, boars and even giants. Whatever unpleasant surprises Gawain misses in the previous wilderness are cropped up in this continuous trek. Still, physical dangers on the way are not the major concern for a romance hero. But the payment due the Green Knight makes Gawain anxious and the extended wilderness has become the process time for him to anticipate the final moment. The visible scene connects to the invisible anxiety that aggravates his discomfort and frightful feeling. The

narrator then speaks out for our hero:

> Nade he ben du3ty and dry3e, and Dry3tyn had serued,
> Douteles he hade ben ded and dreped ful ofte. (ll.724-25)

In face of the uncontrollable situation Gawain becomes small. He has to depend on the power and might of High God (Dry3tyn) thereby revealing the religious side of him. In his helplessness he does not keep silent. Silence in the sense of being detached from the divine is not considered a virtue by him. Like a fully human soul his mind turns to God in whom he serves and whose power and mercy he trusts. He has tried out all human capabilities and is aware that something is beyond his control. Mere enduring (dry3e) is not achieving. As in most Middle English religious writings, the Gawain-poet emphasizes the body's role in religious experience by means of fasting, penance, and prayer (Twomey 76). Happily, Gawain has opted for the form of prayer.

> And þerfore sykyng he sayde, 'I beseche þe, lorde,
> And Mary, þat is myldest moder so dere,
> Of sum herber þer he3ly I my3t here masse,
> Ande þy matynez to-morne, mekely I ask,
> And þerto prestly I pray my pater and aue and crede.' (ll. 753-57)

Gawain's invocation on God and to Mary unmistakably delineates traditional religious piety (Twomey 75) and such "somatic piety" reflects the "characteristic of mainstream Catholicism of the time" (Twomey 76). What Gawain does is to first address the Lord God, and then Holy Mary in that order. It is common among Catholics to pray to Holy Mary for intercession during the Middle Ages.[5] What Gawain prays is to have a

[5] Adoration of Holy Mary, Mother of God, since the Middle Ages has been expressed in various fashions of prayer, hymns, paintings, music, architecture, and other art

shelter for the night so that he can hear a mass and say his canonical prayers (matins or compline), as well as his Paternoster, Ave Maria and Creed. These are common gestures to show one's faith and piety at the time. Else, Gawain's prayer is not to seek for personal comfort, but to fulfill his devotion. This portrayal is consistent with his vulnerable behavior as revealed later in the Green Chapel which is another phase of the wilderness. In face of the unknown wild world, the helpless Gawain is portrayed as religious. Ordinarily he does not have the opportunity to reflect on his true self amidst all vanities. Now, in praying he brings forth his spirituality. Despite some recent studies that marginalize the religious sentiments of Gawain,[6] there is still sharp observation on the importance of that dimension in Gawain's wilderness experience. Neglecting that part will render some portions of the poem meaningless, e.g., the image of the pentangle on Gawain's shield and his intention to seek a place to observe mass. To illustrate the "inward sense of religion," it has been argued that "Gawain's externalizing and physicalizing language expresses an entirely

forms. That Mary is held in veneration is part of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Church theology, now known as Mariology. The third Ecumenical Council held in 431 at Ephesus affirmed Mary with the title of "Mother of God," (*theotokos*). By the medieval period there was a growth in the devotion to Mary. Pope Clement IV (1265–1268) even composed a poem on the seven joys of Mary to celebrate the Marian theology. In *SGGK*, Gawain's devotion to Blessed Mary typifies the medieval religious mood. For a comprehensive view of the significance of Mary's position in the Catholic Church, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996). On the theological implication, dogma, doctrine, liturgy and devotion of the Virgin Mary, see Mark I. Miravalle, ed. *Mariology: A Guide for Priests, Deacons, Seminarians, and Consecrated Persons* (Goleta, CA : Seat of Wisdom Books, a division of Queenship pub, 2008), also the book edited by Judith Marie Gentle, *De maria numquam satis : the Significance of the Catholic Doctrines on the Blessed Virgin Mary for All People*. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009).

[6] Michael W. Twomey has pointed out this phenomenon in his article (pp. 74-75 n.6) and the marginalized attempt is especially obvious in Kevin Gustafson, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," in *A Companion to Medieval English Literature and Culture,* ed. Peter Brown (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 619-33.

conventional, mainstream religious sensibility in a fourteenth-century context" (Twomey 92). But Gawain as a chivalric knight does not belong to the contemplative or ascetic class, and his praying is motivated by a stressful feeling that he could do no more as an earthling. It is recognition of his own limitation. In praying, he intends to have God to be on his side, a higher form of chivalric fellowship that lends him a hand. What the act indicates is that he learns to be humble yet confident, not confused and never lose his self-sustaining power while carrying out his mission to seek after the Green Knight.

Upon arriving Bertilak Hautdeset's castle, Gawain seemingly has left behind the Wirral wilderness. In actuality, the Wirral is only the outpost and buffer zone of the castle. Both the Wirral and the castle should be taken as the vestibule of the Green Chapel. The Wirral is Part One of the wilderness; the Castle is Part Two and the Green Chapel Part Three in the sequel. The sexual advance of the lady of the castle paves the moral wilderness as well as trials and ambush for Gawain to tackle. If physically the Wirral is like a forest and a stretch of undulating bushes with a variety of vegetation, the castle chamber induces temptations and lessons to be learned. Each of the three trying days cast by Lady Bertilak is a gradation of the previous interlude. The three serial temptations pose no physical danger to Gawain, but spiritual peril. Had he failed to keep his chastity, he would have committed a mortal sin which means death to his soul. This will be like becoming a victim of the wild beasts and giants in the Wirral. Outwardly, Gawain is being entertained in the castle; spiritually he is under the attack of a deadly sin. His perils are to confront the three enemies of his soul—the world, the flesh and the devil (Eph. 2:1-3; 1 John 2:16).[7] These enemies allegorize his desire which if not surmounted will

[7] This medieval theological idea survived even in the Reformation England and is found among major poets. See particularly Patrick Cullen, *Infernal Triad: The Flesh, the World, and the Devil in Spenser and Milton* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974).

become the wasteland of his mind. The Wirral denotes the topographical wilderness while the castle's chamber his psychological wilderness. The latter is a continuation of the former and is more dreadful because it destroys not just the body but also the soul. Both are mysterious in that they belong to the unknown and inconceivable domain. Nevertheless, the first wilderness has been overcome by an act of devotion for after Gawain's prayer and blessing himself three times he suddenly sees a dwelling place (ll. 763-64). The second wilderness, or Part Two, in his bed chamber is also resolved via religious piety. In the first day Gawain dispelled the moral peril by calling on Mary (l. 1263) and Christ the Savior (l.1279), on the second day on God (l. 1535) and the Savior (l. 1548) again. And on the third day after accepting the girdle from the lady he immediately seeks out the castle chapel priest to make a full confession (ll.1876-1884). Hence theologically his sin has been absolved and the illness he contracted in the moral wilderness has been cured. Superficially, the Hautdesert Castle is a comfortable place to rest and relax after a tough journey. However, it has to be treated as an extension of the Wirral and is the enemy of soul. Yet in face of the moral dangers Gawain's spirituality is further aroused and deepened.

The third part of the wilderness is a landmark that includes the visible and invisible domains. It is no other than the vicinity of the Green Chapel that Gawain is bound to go. Its grisliness is described by the guide (ll.2097-2117) who labels the place as "waste" (uninhabited land) where only lives a wild man four times as big as any knight in Arthur's house. Thus the "waste" is inhabited by a fierce and murderous wild man, presumably the Green Knight. It is not just the blighted geography but the inhuman elements that render the place intimidating. Gawain confirms it himself when he sees the bleak location "ouergrowen with gresse in glodes aywhere" (l. 2181). He authenticates the gory scene as follows:

'Now iwysse,' quoþ Wowayn, 'wysty is here;
þis oritore is vgly, with erbez ouergrowen;
Wel bisemez þe wyȝe wruxled in grene
Dele here his deuocioun on þe deuelez wyse.
Now I fele hit is þe fende, in my fyue wyttez,
þat has stoken me þis steuen to strye me here.
þis is a chapel of meschaunce, þat chekke hit bytyde!
Hit is þe corsedest kyrk þat euer I come inne.' (ll. 2189-96)

To Gawain, this wilderness, unlike the first one, is somewhat an open space grown with wild grass but is psychologically fearful. The Wirral is flourished with various kinds of wildlife, but this "waste" and the designated church is ugly and overgrown with green plants. Its very location in a bizarre hill does not incite pious contemplation but makes Gawain think that someone clad in green will exercise his devilish devotion, or rather anti-Christ type of devotion in cheerless manner. The landscape together with its imaginary situation is strongly satirical. It recalls faintly the "Iron Age Europe high places . . . utilized for religious purposes" and of the "Roman world. . . hilltop sanctuaries" (Howe 215) now in ruin. The green color forebodes the Green Knight who may be taken as "a steward of the forest by looking historically at the ecology of Hautdesert "[8] (Twomey 2013:30). For that matter, the entire landscape, particularly the green vegetation, signifies the dominance and power of the Green Knight. This wasteland though flushed with green hue is not filled with vibrant life but frightful insinuation. Besides, Gawain's soliloquy echoes a surmise that "how can a ruinous church not be cursed if it belongs to the temple of the devil?" The immediate emotional response of Gawain is fear of misfortune. This church (kyrk) situated in a wysty 'waste'

[8] The idea of treating the Green Knight as a steward of nature though unkind is part of the argument of Michael George's article "Gawain's Struggle with Ecology: Attitudes toward the Natural World in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Journal of Ecocriticism* 2.2 (July 2010): 30-44.

makes the occasion ironic because instead of bringing blessings to Gawain, it will effect his destruction, body and soul together.

This Part Three of the wilderness has figured a fearsome rugged terrain of a wasteland that promises to be the final destination of Gawain. While in the Wirral, life forms are rude villagers, uninformed passers-by, wild beasts or outlaws, Part Three has none of these but a fatal foe who has made a covenant to have Gawain kill. Part One is dreary but Part Three is worse; it is deadly. If the wilderness is the rite de passage to prove Gawain's heroic spirit, the wasteland is the final destiny to test whether Gawain is a true hero or not. This part of the wilderness mentions "green" twice but with specific implications. One appears in forms of herbs and plants and the other by foretelling "þe wyȝe wruxled in grene." The color is satirically green in that the ambience provides an anti-Christ type of devotion. This color, befitting the wasteland, forms an oasis not in a desert but in the wilderness, not delightful, but awfully bleak and injurious, portending the horror of the Green Knight and the Green Chapel. In fact, Gawain's travel from the Wirral to Hautdesert castle and "his journey from Hautdesert to the Green Chapel" are all linked up (Twomey 2013:31) as a unity with the Green Knight/Bertilak acting as the coordinating steward. The movement of space and the various aspects of the bleakly landscape confirm the "pedestrian logic" which conjoins the three stages of the wilderness. The forest in which Bertilak went hunting is adjacent ("Hit is not two myle henne" l. 1078) to his castle and probably extends into the wilderness of Wirale. Now at the site of the Green Chapel, the Green knight addresses Gawain, "Iwysse þou art welcome, wyȝe, to my place./ And þou hatz tymed þi trauayl as true mon schule" (ll. 2240-41). Clearly proclaimed, the wasteland is the Green Knight's "place" and hence the terrain is a mere spot of his extensive territories. After all, the Green Knight is called Bertilak de Hautdesert, which semantically means Bertilak of "High Desert." Being lord of the High Desert, he owns the wilderness,

the castle, the adjacent wasteland and all its neighboring terrains. Hence, the Wirral and the wasteland of the Green Chapel are correlated parts of one vast piece of wilderness. Furthermore, when Bertilak confesses to Gawain that the latter's temptations were all his work: "I wro3t hit myseluen./ I sende hir to assay þe" (ll. 2361-62), the three aspects of the wilderness then fall in, some physical, some mental and some spiritual.

After the reconciliation and resolution with Bertilak, Gawain declined the offer to go back to the former's castle. Gawain cites Biblical examples of the *femmes fatales*, or rather beguiling women, and he regrets he has been deceived by a woman just like Adam, Solomon, Samson and David. In admitting his own dishonesty for fear of his life, he feels remorseful. His wearing the green girdle to remind him of his sin immediately positions him to confront the human versus divine order. In addition, in confessing, he regains his once lost integrity and honor. The bleak landscape and the perilous trials urge him to examine his moral vulnerability. Moving from the Logres to the territories of Hautdesert, Gawain has traversed from the urban to the rural. The wilderness provides him with occasions to understand his true self, discounts his haughtiness, induces his religious piety and places him to encounter the hostile nature that brings him to respect nature's potent force and to perceive the sacrality and creative vitality of the divine. The wilderness, particularly the part at the Green Chapel, is definitely bleak but its death threat enables him to engage in religious awakening, or immerging with God in a sense. The weariness, desolation and frightfulness leading to the admission of his sin are beneficial to his spiritual health. In realizing his frailty and limitation, he has turned to prayers. By mentioning the historical beguiling women he has not changed to a misogynist, rather it is an admission of his bodily weakness. In confessing, he purifies himself to attain to a higher level of self-esteem and understand the deeper meaning of mercy. One cannot conquer mother nature; rather, one has to respect it and become a steward

of it just like the Green Knight. After all, nature is part of the divine creativity through which Gawain readjusts his perception of courtly behaviors. The seemingly bleak and intimidating landscape turns out to be an educational and benign force to recharge his prowess and uplift his spirituality.

Works Cited

Bliss, A. J. *Sir Orfeo*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966.

Chandler, John. *John Leland's Itinerary Travels in Tudor England*. Stroud, Thrupp, Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 1998.

Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973.

George, Michael W. "Gawain's Struggle with Ecology: Attitudes toward the Natural World in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Journal of Ecocriticism* 2.2 (July 2010):30-44.

Howe, John. "Creating Symbolic Landscapes: Medieval Development of Sacred Space." *Inventing Medieval Landscapes: Senses of Place in Western Europe*. Ed. John Howe and Michael Wolfe. Gainesville, Tallahassee, Tampa: University Press of Florida, 2002. 208-223.

Howes, Laura L. "Narrative Time and Literary Landscapes in Middle English Poetry." *Inventing Medieval Landscapes: Senses of Place in Western Europe*. Ed. John Howe and Michael Wolfe. Gainesville, Tallahassee, Tampa: University Press of Florida, 2002. 192-207.

Jones, Gwyn and Thomas Jones, trans. "Peredur Son of Efrawg." *The Mabinogian*. London: Dent; New York: Dutton, 1970. 183-227.

Rackham, Oliver. "The Medieval Countryside of England: Botany and Archaeology." *Inventing Medieval Landscapes: Senses of Place in Western Europe*. Ed. John Howe and Michael Wolfe. Gainesville, Tallahassee, Tampa: University Press of Florida, 2002. 13-32.

Gillian Rudd, "'The Wilderness of Wirral' in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*."

Arthuriana 23. 1 (Spring 2013): 52-65.

Spearing, A. C. "Public and Private Spaces in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *Arthuriana* 4.2 (Summer 1994):138-145.

Tolkien, J. R. R. and E. V. Gordon ed. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. 2nd ed. Rev. Norman Davis. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967.

Twomey, Michael W. "Hadet with an aluish mon' and 'britned to noȝt': *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Death, and the Devil." *The Arthurian Way of Death: the English Tradition*. Ed. Karen Cherewatuk and K. S. Whetter. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009. 73-93.

_____. "How Green was the Green Knight? Forest Ecology at Hautdesert." Ed. Elizabeth Archibald and David F. Johnson. *Arthurian Literature* XXX. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2013. 27-53

ABSTRACT

The Benign but Bleak "wyldrenesse" in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

Francis K. H. So

Deep in winter when Sir Gawain sets forth on his adventure to look for the Green Knight, he has nothing but trepidation. The journey brings him to traverse over a lonesome trek of wilderness, somewhere desolate, wild, hardly inhabited by decent people and beyond the control of humans. Lines 698-735 in SGGK yield the locus classicus of the wild world motif. Unlike Chaucer's pilgrims envisioning the "holt and heeth" that promise to burgeon with young lives, Gawain's contact of wilderness is less than spectacular and full of anxieties and uncertainties. Yet the distressful land serves as his soul's ecosystem to purify his haughty ego, rips off his courtly mask and forces him to face his own shortcomings. The ultimate benefit of the wilderness experience leads him to come close to God, that is, making him realize his frailty and so depend more on moral obligations than before. This paper will explore the role wilderness plays where Gawain's vain chivalric activities are restricted but spiritual growth is enhanced. Much as the fearful land is a refuge for all things natural, the pristine and uncorrupted ambience while threatening Gawain's physical well-being and incapacitating his chivalric potentiality leaves him to his bare flesh, or human impotence against nature. This wilderness empowers him with the ability to reflect on his limitations thereby preparing him to act as a virile errant knight.

Key Words | *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, wilderness, stress, spiritual growth

Submitted 28 Dec. 2015 | **Review Completed** 27 Jan. 2016 | **Accepted** 31 Jan. 2016