Specters Of Gawain - The Exorcism Ritual Of Gawain And The Green Knight

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Abstract: Using the discussion of phantoms in Jacques Derrida's Specters of Marx, this paper discusses the spectres that pervade the text and history of Gawain and the Green Knight, through unanswerable questions concerning the composer of the text and the anachronisms in the narrative. It also discusses a reading of GGK in that during the Christmas feast at the beginning of the tale, Arthur performs a ritual that invokes a spectre in the form of the Green Knight. Although this is a spectre that Gawain must exorcise, there are many spectres, indeed, many levels of spectres within the tale, including the tale itself.

Ambiguity fills the poem of *Gawain and the Green Knight*, or does it? The aim of this paper is to look at phantoms in *Gawain*, with particular reference to Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, although Derrida does not mention *Gawain*, and refers to spectres more generally. I shall analyse the invocation and creation of a spectre, the metamorphosis of the apparition and finally, the attempt at exorcism. This is just one reading of *Gawain*: other critics believe the poem has a Christian motif, or offers a pagan ideal. If we accept there is no fixed definition of the poem, then it seems the 'phantom' is already present. The reasons for the poem, and the phantom itself, are suitably indistinct.

The spectres of *Gawain* exist even before we begin the text. We know nothing about the composer; no age, occupation, nor gender. However, during the fifteenth century the words 'Hugo de', the first part of a name, were written on the first folio of *Gawain*.* Who 'Hugo' was, or why his name appears with the unfamiliarity of a haunting – the name of a scribe or the poet? – we shall never know. No names, not even the name of the poem: subsequent editors added the title.

The spectre also exists in the form of the original story; not the manuscript that rose, phoenix-like, from the fire of 1731, but one from which the poet draws his material. We know nothing about it, save the poet saying he heard a 'laye' 'in toun'.[1] As part of the oral tradition, a minstrel would speak or sing the lay, but speech relies on presence, and writing relies on absence. No one in the past remains to tell us about the creation of the poem, so the future, quite literally, belongs to ghosts. Derrida says 'Inheritance from spirits of the past consists … in borrowing. And borrowing speaks: borrowed language, borrowed names'.[2] For Derrida, the spirit occupies a space between the abstract ideals and attempts to embody them in full 'present' actuality. Instead of "ontology", dealing with the nature of 'being', Derrida describes the concept of "Hauntology", the logic of the spectre. If we can draw no absolutes from *Gawain*, that in itself is a form of Hauntology.

One text cited by Derrida, is *Hamlet*, most particularly the line 'Time is out of joint'. This, too, is the fate of Gawain, born to dispel the spectre. The poem begins in Camelot, an anachronistic realm, where, if it ever existed, the knights would not have worn fourteenth century armour shown by images in the manuscript.* Through this disjointure of the past with the present – that is, an Arthurian heritage that already exists in a fourteenth century present, and the presence of both of these heritages in today's present – we see the creation of a spectral realm of the 'historical Arthur'. This realm does not belong to one past, but to many.

Arthur himself invokes the apparition, performing the summoning ritual. He fasts and offers a sacrifice by calling for a blood sport. The effect of this invocation is the arrival of the phantom, the Green Knight. As with *Hamlet*, *Gawain* opens by waiting for the apparition, or at least, 'sum auenturus þyng' to come.[3] Appearing at Arthur's request the Greek Knight confirms the invocation, wishing to address the person that summoned him: 'Wher is … þe gouernour of þis ging?'[4] The Green Knight also shows he is not *subject* to human rule on entering the halls of Camelot: addressing Arthur, he states 'I wolde se þat segg in si3t, and with hymselve speke raysoun'.[5] Derrida describes this as the *actuality* of the spectre, a present and empirical form, and not simply an expression of fears. The Green Knight joins a normal situation, and is welcomed, but, in true Derridian style, a series of oppositions bind him. On the one hand, the Green Knight is a frightening figure, carrying a fearful weapon. On the other hand, he has the

[1] J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon, eds., <u>Sir Gawain and the Green Knight</u>, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), l. 31.
[2] Jacques Derrida, <u>Specters of Marx</u>, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 109.
[3] *Gawain*, l. 93.
[4] *Gawain*, ll. 224–5.
[5] *Gawain*, ll. 225–7.

semblance of a courtly knight. While terrifying, he is also handsome; his holly branch, here a symbol of peace, also has adverse connotations as Saturn carried a holly club. There are many conflicting images when the Green Knight appears. He lives in the comfortable castle in a winter landscape; the tests are examples of blood-sports against lust, words against weapons; he is a mocking enchanter and a fun-loving Lord. Descriptions of the Green Knight are always ambiguous, so while Gawain refers to him as a 'Fantoum', or illusion, there is never a rattling of any chains, unless the chains are the 'lettres loken' imprisoning the plot in alliteration, and providing a haunting rhythm that is strangely familiar.[6]

There is an *adequate* description of the Green Knight, yet, surprisingly, the only description of Gawain is when he dons his armour. Neither does the poet give details of Gawain's reputation, so there seems a shared knowledge between poet and audience, a spectre of Gawain's renown. Gawain is famed for his love talk: in Malory's *Morte D'Arthur,* Gawain appears as a spirit before the battle of Camlann, surrounded by 'ladyes for whom I have forten for, whan I was man lyvyng'.[7] In *Gawain*, however, when the Lady tries to woo him with his reputation, he seems unwilling to live up to it. In this regard, the images blur, blend, and therefore haunt, each other.

The haunting takes place all the way through the poem. Stage directions do not restrict the Green Knight as they do with the ghost of Hamlet's father. Instead the knight appears when you least expect it, for example, as the lord of Castle Hautdesert, and perhaps even the guide who leads Gawain to the Chapel. The physical presence does not restrict the haunting of the spectre, nor do Gawain's thoughts or words bind him. Derrida states that 'ghosts speak different languages';[8] however, I suggest the underlying threat is in what the Green Knight does ***not*** say, and his unspoken premonitions of what is to come, what might be considered as 'ghost words'. 'Something is haunted,' Derrida observes, 'by what it excludes, combats and represses'. The knight's clothing, for example, is green and gold, the same colours as the girdle that Gawain expects will save his life. In addition, embroidered upon the knight's clothes is a butterfly, a symbol of metamorphosis: the Green Knight is just one of many masks worn by the host. And, of course, the Green Knight does not explain *all* the rules of his challenge. Initially, no one accepts the Green Knight's 'game'. This is a repression, and therefore, a confirmation of a haunting. How often in literature and films when the supernatural is at its most prevalent, does the protagonist state 'there are no such things as ghosts'?

However, accepting the Green Knight's challenge, Gawain tries to ensure he'll win the game by removing his opponent's head from his shoulders: primitive, but effective. The blade cleaves through the neck and drives into the ground, and a gush of blood flows from the body, another example of the *actuality* of the spectre. However the Green Knight's body does not fall; instead the knight picks up his head: often reported sightings of a spectre state that the 'ghost carried its head under its arm'. The severed head speaks like a creditor, stating Gawain's reputation depends on his fulfilling the contract, warning him to 'com, oþer recreaunt be calde'.[9] The knight mounts his horse and tells Gawain to look for the Green Chapel and receive the return blow within a year. The Green Knight makes Gawain 'Refourme … oure forwardes' – recount the agreement – that binds him for a year, one of the most unfortunate New Year resolutions.[10] The register is of a legal document, although the conjured spirit makes the human believe that *he* has the power over the invoked. Thus there are three stages of the ritual for summoning an apparition, starting with fasting and offering of blood, then summoning the spirit, and finally sealing the pact. This contract is like the Ghost of Hamlet's father who demands that Horatio 'swear by the sword'.[11] With his honour at stake, Gawain cannot refuse the Green Knight's offer. Derrida suggests that 'mourning localises the dead', and 'exorcism is an incantation to state that a dead man is really dead'.[12] There is no mourning with the decapitation of the Green Knight: the court feels only fear. The exorcism of the Green Knight is never truly complete in Gawain's mind, and the body is never interred.

[6] *Gawain*, l. 35.
[7] Thomas Malory, Complete Works, ed. Eugène Vinaver (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 711.
[8] Derrida, Specters of Marx, p. 104.
[9] *Gawain*, l. 456.
[10] *Gawain*, l. 378.
[11] Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I.v.
[12] Derrida, Specters of Marx, p. 48.

However, in Green Knight form, rather than that of Bercilak, there is no mention of any corporeality. He never touches Gawain in their two meetings, but as Bercilak he embraces Gawain on a number of occasions. When Gawain decapitates the Green Knight, he had used the force needed to sever the head, expecting to meet with some resistance, but finding none. Should this be evidence of the Green Knight's non-corporeality? At the second meeting there is the additional disembodied voice that meets Gawain as he approaches the Green Chapel, appearing to come from above, and not from a cave from which the Green Knight emerges.

Derrida says 'if a spectre represents what we fear, then a promise or a threat can be as much of a spectre as the apparition itself'.[13] By beheading the Green Knight, Gawain creates his own ghost, and the final confrontation is Gawain's attempt to exorcise the evil that has entered Arthur's court, a court that will eventually destroy itself. A choice, a responsibility, has a meaning, and a meaning that will have to pass through the ordeal of the undecidable. Hamlet says to the ghost of his father 'I'll follow thee', and by 'killing' the Green Knight, Gawain creates and follows his own ghost and therefore determines the consequences for his future. If Gawain had not taken the challenge, he would not have had to locate the Green Chapel, nor faced the challenges that took place there and in the castle. The loss of the body does not affect the spectre itself, only the perceptions of the living. From the point of decapitation onwards, it is impossible to discern whether Gawain faces a spectre or the spectre of the spectre.[14] The Green Knight ceases to exist once he has passed from sight; the poet states that 'To what kyth he becom knwe non þere, neuer more þen þey wyste from queþen he watz wonnen'.[15]

The decapitation of the Green Knight is described like the pollarding of an old tree. One reading of this is that the Green Knight is a representation of the Green Man, whose decapitation and revival represents the annual change of seasons. This being the case, he regenerates in the spring; the first two stanzas of Part 2, show the seasons passing and the vegetation regenerating.[16] This would be, as Derrida says, a *renaissance*, or rebirth, rather than a *re-venence*, or coming again. Another reading is that Gawain travels into the underworld to face his foe, and that the Green Knight is the representation of Death. This seems more plausible: Gawain crosses water to reach Bercilak's castle *and* the Green Chapel, like the river that separates the dreamer from his daughter in *Pearl*. Although dates hold the ideality of some spectres, the spectres are not just corporeal or non-corporal attention-seeking entities that appear rattling chains at Christmas time. However, Gawain starts at Christmas, a symbolic date for someone who was born to die, and is already partly a ghost. Gawain leaves to search for the Green Knight on All Souls' Day – so, his soul, his inner spirit, is brought into play.

Having created his phantom, and become a hostage to the unknown, Gawain will not turn aside from his quest for exorcism. When arriving at the Chapel, Gawain's guide urges him to 'Cayrez bi sum oþer kyth' – leave by some other land'.[17] As the Green Knight can change shape, and has to travel to the Chapel himself, we can speculate he assumed the guise of a guide in order to arrive there at the same time as his challenger. When Gawain faces the Green Knight at the Chapel, it shows Derrida's view of 'Hauntology' – the impossibility of repetition and the 'first time'. It is the repetition of the spirit, the revenant, in their second meeting, but Gawain is also seeing it for the first time in his own realm. The Green Knight possesses an empire (the nature realm) whence it metamorphoses into a plurality of beings.[18] Thus the Hauntology is established, and the final challenge is the attempted exorcism. Gawain has already failed the test in the castle, but survives the terrifying ordeal of the Green Knight's axe. A spectre, according to Derrida, is 'to make fear, (and) to make oneself fear'.[19] In a complex poem as Gawain the motivation of the Green Knight's test is curiously not explained adequately and remains as ambiguous as the ghost without the rattling chains. The only explanation is that 'Morgan the goddess' told Bercilak to 'greue Gaynour and gart hir to dyʒe.'[20] Thus, the Green Knight's motivation was solely to create fear. Perhaps, Morgana creates the illusion of the Green Knight as well as the illusion of a

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[13] Derrida, <u>Specters of Marx</u>, p. 38.
[14] Derrida, <u>Specters of Marx</u>, p. 117.
[15] *Gawain*, ll. 460–1.
[16] *Gawain*, ll. 491–535.
[17] *Gawain*, l. 2120.
[18] Derrida, <u>Specters of Marx</u>, p. 143.
[19] Derrida, <u>Specters of Marx</u>, p. 104.
[20] *Gawain*, l. 2460.

castle in the wilderness described as 'pared out of papure.'[21] The castle appears from nowhere, and the folk that Gawain questions on his journey know nothing of the Green Knight nor his chapel, curious if they live close by. The castle, made of paper, is a structure without substance, as ethereal as the Green Knight himself. Although, perhaps the Green Knight was lying to Gawain when he claimed to be the host in the castle? One would expect that, on completion of the test, the Green Knight would revert to his human form, but nothing in the poem suggests he did this. Derrida states that 'One can always lie, he can disguise himself as a ghost, another ghost may also be passing himself off as this one'.[22] We never know the true form of the spectre, nor the true form of the Green Knight.

Haunting, in a way, represents a struggle for power. The one who is stronger can either terrorise, or exorcise, their opposite. This is true of Gawain, who, having accepted the Green Knight's challenge, must abide by someone else's rules until he can shift the balance of power. Considering this, and noting that Gawain returns home in shame and humiliation, it is the Green Knight who has managed to defeat, or exorcise, Gawain. If a proper name establishes one's identity, then we see the importance of the statements by both the Green Knight and the Lady that 'þou art not Gawayn'.[23] The Lady's statement is to ensnare Gawain by his reputation with the women; the Green Knight's accusation leads Gawain to bear his neck to meet the blade. It is reminiscent of Solomon's seal, seen on Gawain's shield as a symbol of his virtues, which gives him the power to discern their names, and command them. Thus, when Gawain establishes his own name to Bercilak and the Lady, he places his life in peril. Conversely, when the Green Knight names himself as Bercilak de Hautdesert, we see that he is exploiting the use of power and shows Gawain's defeat. Although Bercilak has won, Morgana's intended victim was Arthur, and she had not anticipated Gawain accepting the challenge. Thus, Morgana must find another way of defeating her brother. The audience would know this unspoken future, that something is rotten in the kingdom of Camelot, but not any of the characters in *Gawain*.

Dismissed, Gawain returns to Camelot, but finds no peace on his return. The ghosts that we have seen are not the ghosts of the dead, but the ghosts of the living. Gawain returns as a broken man, knowing that an adversary he created still stands and might return one day. When Gawain tells the King of his trials, Arthur insists that everyone wears a green girdle to celebrate Gawain's valour, but Gawain's shameful memories haunt him. His death would have destroyed the spectre, but instead he creates another spectre made up by his fear and guilt. The spectre takes the centre stage and relegates the living to the wings.

However, did these events take place, even within the text? Was the spectre of the Green Knight a fear present in *Arthur's* mind? Possibly the poem was simply the tale of excitement that Arthur required before he sat down to his meal. In this case, the phantom is a creation of the living, an alliance between Arthur and his unspoken fears, his uncanny prediction for the future of his lands. The telling of the tale could be his attempt to dispel the spectre of destruction he knows must come soon, and he must create his own manifesto: 'A spectre is haunting Camelot – the spectre of betrayal'.

The phantom never dies. It always remains to return. Six hundred years after the spectre was first invoked, we have invoked it again here, and the poem has shaped the future – there are other tales of Gawain, involving metamorphosis and decapitation. Similarly, the Green Knight returns as Sir Pertolope – Sir Garath's opponent – in Malory's *Morte*. If we accept the Bible's invocation of ghosts, which is that 'the word' that is, nothing, 'was made flesh' then the non-corporeal ghost of the past becomes a living reality of the future. Derrida states that 'the future can only be for the ghosts - [a]nd the past'.[24] In the future, we shall all become ghosts, and that future is like a wheel of fortune, just like the poem ends as it started 'After þe segge and þe asaute watz sesed at Troye', and that beginning led to the invocation of the spectre. There is only one force in the universe that can truly lay a ghost to rest and that is the spectre itself; as Christ says 'let the dead, bury the dead.'

[21] *Gawain*, l. 802.
[22] Derrida, Specters of Marx, pp. 7–8.
[23] *Gawain*, ll. 1293 and 2270.
[24] Derrida, Specters of Marx, p. 37.