

The Journey to the Self: Stages of Trauma and Initiation in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

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The ending in *Sir Gawain* is the climax of the hero's drama over a full annual cycle, in which he encounters a variety of strange characters, some of whom wish to harm him and others to help him. I claim that the plot presents an ordered system of cultural symbols and clear archetypal substructures by means of which the anonymous author describes the trials and tribulations of the adolescent boy. I will employ for this purpose Jungian psychologist Esther Harding's model that appears in her book *The I and the Not-I*. I claim that the plot demonstrates how an individual progresses from a self-focused ego to a mature, responsible existence in harmony with both nature and culture.

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The Fathers the Mothers and the Son

On a snowy, stormy day, at sunrise, having received the gift of the green girdle from his host's wife, Gawain sets out with a heavy heart for his encounter in the Green Chapel with the Green Knight. The guide that the lord of the castle has placed at his disposal accompanies him a good part of the way until the two begin to approach the chapel, where the guide informs him that he will on no account go one step further. His companion advises "*goude Sir Gawayn*" (line 2118) that if he values his life he should escape while he still has the chance, and promises to reveal the flight to no one. Gawain, however, is determined to honor his undertaking and reassures the guide that he places his trust in God and has no intention of withdrawing. Left alone, Gawain loudly informs his menacing opponent that he has arrived, as promised, to play his part in the beheading game. On hearing the call, the Green Knight emerges from the mountains wielding his terrifying axe.

The ending in *Sir Gawain* is the climax of the hero's drama over a full annual cycle, in which he

encounters a variety of strange characters, some of whom wish to harm him and others to help him. This article reviews the roles of the three types of men and three types of women who accompany the knight on his exhausting journey. I claim that the plot presents an ordered system of cultural symbols and clear archetypal substructures by means of which the anonymous author describes the trials and tribulations of the adolescent boy. I will employ for this purpose Jungian psychologist Esther Harding's model that appears in her book *The I and the Not-I* (1993). Using this model, I will show that the plot sequence should be read as a rich episodic mosaic, describing a series of emotionally loaded relationships between father and son, and mother and son. While the text describes the quest of a Knight of the Round Table at the outset of his life journey, the meta-text describes the stages of emotional maturity that an adolescent undergoes, moving from a lack of awareness and total dependence (childhood) towards autonomy and awareness (adulthood). During this process, the hero consolidates his individual, independent identity. I claim that the plot demonstrates how an individual progresses from a self-focused ego to a mature, responsible existence in harmony with both nature and society. The hero's completion of the adventure in the best possible manner reflects the successful completion of the process – a physical and mental progression that integrates outside and inside, nature and culture.

Beheading as a metaphor

In his book *Symbolic Stories* (1988), literary researcher Derek Brewer identifies the character of the Green Knight as the image of the father and that of young Gawain as the image of the son. Brewer interprets the Green Knight's aggression and his terrifying green form as a visual manifestation of the son's anxious mental state in the oedipal stage and of

his fear of castration by the father.¹ The source of the fear that grips the "son" is the understanding that the two face "father" (sir Bertilac/the green knight) can harm him irreparably (behead him) while he cannot hurt the omnipotent "father" (lines 2282-3). There is concrete evidence: even after being beheaded by the axe's blow, the "father" is able to replace his severed head. This reading of the beheading as a metaphor for mental tension emanating from a crisis in the father-son relationship is reinforced in a French poem from the end of the 12th century (about one hundred and fifty years before Sir Gawain) – "Le Livre de Caradoc" – appearing in a collection *Conte du Graal, la Continuation Gauvain* (Szkilnik, 1992). "The Beheading Game" in the poem ends with the secret exposed and the identity of the mysterious "beheader" revealed as the sorcerer Eliavres. After fulfilling the task, the "beheader" secretly tells the contestant, Caradoc Briebras, a young knight only recently knighted by King Arthur, that he initiated the game so as to create a suitable opportunity to reveal to Caradoc that he is his biological father.²

¹ Compare with Sadowski, 1996, p. 36; Benson and Rudnytsky, 1980, p. 377.

² The story of the beheading has an even earlier version. The foundations of the story are borrowed from an ancient Irish tale that appears in the Ulster Cycle from about the eighth century. In the eleventh century the story had several popular Irish versions; one of the more familiar tales, known as the Bricriu's Feast, appears in the collection Strachan, John and O'Keefe, J. G. (eds.), *Lebor na hUidre* (Book of the Dun Cow). The place of Sir Gawain in the original story is taken by the national hero, the greatest of Irish fighters, Cúchulainn, who was the only person to volunteer to carry out the task planned and executed by the sorcerer Cú Roi. The test set by the sorcerer allowed Cúchulainn to obtain the Champion Portion's prize given to the victor, that is to say, to receive the choicest piece of meat from the mouth-watering

To complete the portrait of the "father" image – that of King Arthur himself is still missing. Brewer discounts the possibility that King Arthur serves as a father image on the grounds of the king's tender age. Rather, he sees in Sir Gawain the embodiment of the aspirations of the king, who in fact failed because he was afraid to fulfill the task on his own (85). The text, however, shows something else. After King Arthur accedes to Gawain's request to fulfill in his stead the task of the odd "Christmas game" (*Crystemas gomen*, line 283), he spares no words in expressing the responsibility he feels toward his young nephew (Tolkien, 1975, p. 34, lines 366-374):

Pen comaunded þe kyng þe knyzt for to ryse; And he ful radly vpros, and ruchched hym fayre, Kneled down bifore þe kyng, and cachez þat weppen; And he luflyly hit hym laft, and lyfte vp his honde, And gef hym Goddez blessing, and gladly hym biddes Þat his hert and his honde schulde hardi be boþe. "Kepe þe cosyn," quof þe kyng, "þat þou on kyrf sette, And if þou redez hym ryzt, redly I trowe Þat þou schal byden þe bur þat he schal bede after."

[The King then commanded that he quickly should rise,/ and he readily uprose and directly approached,/ kneeling humbly before his highness, and laying hand on the weapon;/ and he lovingly relinquished it, and lifting his hand/ gave him God's blessing, and graciously enjoined him/ that his hand and his heart

dish (*curadhmhir*) in addition, of course, to fame and glory. In the Irish version, the esteemed sorcerer Cú Roi has no familial connection to the hero. The anonymous poet of Sir Gawain mentions twice that his story is based on an ancient source that he heard about in books: *The bok as I herde say* (line 690), and another time in the line that concludes the text: *The Brutus bokes therof beres wyttensesse* (line 2253). The influence he alludes to is unclear; it is certainly possible that there were other versions of this story. A new structural frame was assembled on the ancient foundation that matched the date of the writing and the taste of the specific target audience.

should be hardly alike./ "take care, cousin", quoth the king,"one cut to address,/ and if thou learnest him a lesson, I believe very well/ that thou wilt bear any blow that he gives back later.]

The king, as the text indicates, accedes to his nephew's request to face the challenge in his stead, intending to pass on to Gawain the opportunity that has fallen into the king's hands. This is Gawain's chance to prove his suitability to the Order of the Knights of the Round Table, and to show that he has the virtues (line 634), including the loyalty, gallantry and Christian belief, that characterize this magnificent order. The king does not need to provide any further proof of his exceptional abilities and qualifications. Already in the foreword, the author of *Sir Gawain* mentions that there is substantial written evidence of King Arthur's greatness, including his successes in battles and his achievements in wonderful adventures (lines 25-26): "*Bot of alle that here bult of Bretayge kynges/ ay was Arthur the hendest, as I haf herde telle*"[but of all that here abode in Britain as kings/ ever was Arthur most honored, as I have heard men tell.]

It would appear, contrary to Brewer's view, that the king's agreement to young Gawain's request and his suggestions to Gawain immediately afterwards are precisely the reactions of a father anxious about his son's fate before battle. This sincere concern recurs almost a year later on All Saints Day (*Al-hal-day*, line 536) as the time of Gawain's departure approaches. Having hosted Gawain for a whole year in the palace, King Arthur now arranges a festive banquet in honor of his departure. The battle-scarred king also takes care to provide the knight with the finest equipment for his unknown adventure, including a doublet of soft silk, shiny and immaculately designed armor, helmet, kneecaps, steel shoes, weapons and a shield, and a pentangle star of Solomon painted in gold at its center, five triangles enfolding one another (lines 568-626).

The three characters – the Green Knight, the nobleman Bertilak and King Arthur – create a complete, ideal father image. Through these three the importance that the 14th century (when the work was written) individual attributed to the role of the father and the burden of responsibility imposed on him in educating his children is revealed. The three characters embody the five values of bravery, those knightly characteristics that a Knight of the Round Table was required to embody: frankness, fellowship, purity, courtesy, and pity ("*fraunchyse, felazschyp, clannes, cortaysye, pité*," lines 652-4).³ The threefold father image extols the essential social and cultural values, those medieval cultural patterns vital for the consolidation of male identity in a fighting patriarchal society. The father image was central in medieval society; thus the young knight who leaves the comfort of his home, goes out to face unknown dangers not with the blessing of the mother or a mother figure, but with the blessing of the concerned father and under the watchful eyes of his fellow knights, anxious for his fate.⁴ Here the "culture" precedes the initiation procedure itself.

³ These values are part of the perfect symmetry that is divided into five groups of five ("*faythful in fyue and sere fyue sybez*", line 633), which are represented by the star of Solomon on Gawain's shield: "The five points of this pentangle represent Gawain's virtues and beliefs, each of which belongs to five groups of five: 1) Gawain's five faultless senses; 2) Gawain's five 'fingers' (that is to say, his strength); 3) His fervent devotion to the five wounds that Jesus suffered on the cross; 4) The outpouring of his strength from the five joys of the Holy Virgin Mary (The Annunciation, The Nativity, the Resurrection, The Ascension, and The Assumption); 5) The five knightly qualities of Gawain himself: generosity, friendship, chastity, courtesy, and pity." Besserman, 1991, p. 256.

⁴ The Knights of the Round Table who are concerned for Gawain's welfare appear by name as follows: Aywan [Iwain]

Esther Harding claims that a pre-adolescent boy goes through two preliminary stages. The first, known as the "process of individuation," requires an extreme, exceptional, traumatic event to shock him out of his dogmatic coma and force him to act (1993, pp. 4-5, 27). The appearance of the terrifying Green Knight, who bursts into the celebration hall at Camelot, the heart, the fortress and sanctuary of the contender, creates the required mental jolt that motivates the hero to undertake the journey. The trauma or the psychological shock, Harding explains, is like birth: it shifts the individual from a state of apathy and lack of awareness and responsibility to an understanding of the need for a gradual development of consciousness (27). Initially the light of this insight is blinding, but it signifies the beginning of the emergence of judgmental ability. Gawain's willingness to volunteer for the task attests to his "awakening;" this is the start of the process, though it does not yet bear out an ability to see, which will develop gradually over the course of the plot.

Harding defines the second preliminary stage as the adaptation stage, in which "the sensitive individual can adjust itself to the requirements of the environment" (13). In our story, Gawain internalizes his new situation during his year of adaptation in the king's palace. At the end of this allocated period, on the first of November, All Saints Day, he has to detach himself from his familiar and safe place in the community and venture into the forest – a critical stage in the life of a youth who aspires to find his place in the community. To realize this goal, he must, in Harding's terms, put an end to that chapter of his life in which the "imprisonment in the childish *Umwelt* may be ended

and Errik other ful mony,/ Sir Doddinaval de Savage, the duk of Clarence,/ Launcelot and Lyonel and Lucan the gode,/ and many other mensful, with Mador de la Port (lines 550-5).

and the individual be released into the larger world" (28).

Mother Nature and the manhood tasks

Gawain's entry into the forest signifies the beginning of the maturity test itself, in the course of which the hero is required to deal courageously with mental experiences of increasing difficulty in a location and in contexts that are the opposite of "culture." If "culture" is the area of the physical, the conscious and the expected, all of which embody masculine foundations (which in essence are practical and task-oriented), its opposite is "nature," the area of the feminine essence (Mother Nature), the expressly metaphysical, unconscious and unexpected. Accordingly, while the three faces of the father steel the hero to deal with the dangers of the outside, physical world in the preliminary stages, from this stage onward three "mothers" assume a pivotal role and confront him with the urges and the powerful, dynamic aspects of his inner, mental world. The female types chosen for this task represent three very different kinds of women, each of whom, in her own time, and in stages of increasing difficulty, sets the hero a mental-experiential test:

First Test	Second Test	Third Test
The Virgin Mary	The temptress wife	Morgan le Fey
The test of belief	The test of loyalty	The test of light
The mystical experience	The erotic experience	The experience of terror and fear

The hero's entry into the unknown forest with its unexpected challenges signifies, as mentioned, the first

stage in the development of consciousness. There Gawain is forced to deal alone with difficult situations, including detachment and withdrawal from daily life, protracted loneliness, sleeping "in primitive conditions" under the stars in a bitter-cold winter, and attacks by wild animals, evil people and outlaws lurking along his path. The hero suddenly realizes that while his physical dominant characteristics had already been adequately reinforced, thanks to the ideal "masculine" education on which he had been raised, physical vigor does not sufficiently equip him to deal with additional layers of challenge.

The new situations that Gawain encounters in the forest force him, for the first time in his life, to deal with mental anguish and helplessness. The anguish leads to heightened emotions, causing him to turn heavenward with a desperate cry for help. This emotional turmoil is the essential foundation for the gradual process of becoming aware. The recognition that he "lacks" supreme values based in the inner world (mental and spiritual), as well as his realization that he cannot achieve what he wants solely by means of his physical strength, act as a balancing influence on his personality in dealing with the various challenges.

When the helplessness overcomes him, he bursts into tears and calls to the heavens. He seems to particularly expect the help of the Holy Mary, for her portrait was drawn on the inner side of his shield precisely for this purpose (lines 647-650): "*Pat þe hende heuen-quene had of hir chylde;/ At þis cause þe knyzt comlyche hade In þe inore half of his schelde hir ymage depaynted, /þat quen he blusched þerto his belde neuer payred.*" [that to heaven's courteous Queen once came from her child,/For which cause the knight had in comely wise/ on the inner side of his shield her image depainted]

This "heaven queen" is the first internal image that he summons.⁵ In Jungian terms, we define her as "the great mother" and the first mother image among the three. Gawain, unconsciously, turns to the function responsible for the femininity of the soul (*anima*), essential for the internal equilibrium of spirit in his adolescent process. Jung claims that in man's inner world, it is the mother who first bears the *imago* (picture of the soul) and shapes the spirit of the man (the archetype of the *anima*), for she is the source of serenity, security and support (Jung, 1977, pp. 189, 197).⁶ In the Christian Orthodox spirit that characterizes our text, we can identify the spiritual-feminine entity that accompanies the hero as an infrastructure pattern of *anima*-mother. She thus naturally embodies only positive characteristics. The spiritual mother does not impose herself, but rather waits to be approached for help; her presence is thus neither a threat nor a deterrent. Thanks to her, two achievements are chalked up to Gawain. First, her spirit creates mental serenity, bridging the chasm between "the father's" expectations of him to be a fearless knight and his actual situation – as a frightened and helpless youth who has lost his way in the forest. And second, because of the Holy Mary he

⁵ More precisely, line 757 states that Gawain offers a prayer to "my pater and aue and crede," since in the Orthodox Christian text of the Late Middle Ages, a woman has to seem subordinate to a man. Thus, even when the presence of the Holy Mother is required, she does not appear alone, but rather as part of the Holy Trinity (together with the Holy Spirit and Jesus).

⁶ The therapeutic approach that views the appearance of a spiritual entity as "survivors of abuse," that is to say, an effective therapeutic mechanism for solving mental conflicts, is widespread in psychoanalytical-treatment applications in Israel today. On the treatment approach using metaphorical stories for children who have experienced severe physical, sexual or mental abuse, see for example the story of "Menashe" in Megged, 2001, pp. 19-38.

passes his first test in the contest, the test of belief. Gawain places his trust in God, and for this he is rewarded with mystic enlightenment (a high state of consciousness), as she is revealed as the "great mother," and security by means of the religious elation that she arouses in him.⁷ These are both essential achievements for the hero's spiritual-religious development and a fundamental and vital stage in his maturation process. With strengthened belief and a heart imbued with hope, "the son" is mentally prepared to deal with greater difficulty. He mounts his horse, and quickly finds the path he had lost, and then, exactly two miles in front of him a large, illuminated castle appears. Gawain removes his hat, and sinks to his knees in thanks for his salvation.

According to Jung, the mind of one who dreams about the Great Mother (a common archetype), unconsciously creates a regressive route for fulfilling an instinctual wish to unite with the mother. Thus, not coincidentally, in the second stage the image of the spiritual mother is replaced by a concrete, flesh-and-blood mother, by whose means the knight will pass the test of faithfulness ("*trawpe*"). In Bertilak's castle, Gawain meets the young, stunningly beautiful wife of lord of the castle; she will, later in the plot, make three attempts to seduce him during his three-day sojourn in the castle. In the first encounter at the evening banquet,

⁷ In comment 49 of the paragraph discussing mystical experiences, Rudolf Otto characterizes the Christian religion: "As a provisional definition, of mysticism, I would suggest that, while sharing the nature of religion, it shows a preponderance of its non-rational elements and an over-stressing of them, in the respect to the 'overabounding' aspect of the '*numen*.' Type of religious experience acquires 'mystical' colouring, if it shows an inclination of mysticism. In this sense, Christianity since St. Paul and St. is not mysticism, but religious with a mystical colouring. And this is justified." Otto and Harvey, 2004, p. 88.

Gawain, who does not know the identity of the woman is astounded by her beauty and cannot take his eyes off her. He sees her as the most beautiful of women, more alluring than the girls accompanying her, more beautiful even than Queen Guinevere herself, known for her beauty (lines 943-5). Brewer sees in this young wife a visual image of the oedipal phase of the maturing youth and for this reason, he claims, Gawain's feelings towards her endanger his life (1988, p. 84). While she is attractive and seductive, responding to her implies castration by means of the same symbolic beheading by the "father figure" in the form of a green and threatening savage.

The second test, therefore, is the "culture" test, which fits the male criteria that comprise the Feudal-Christian code specific to a fighting Western society. Through this contest, Gawain will develop what is known in the professional jargon as an alter ego. At the confession stage at the adventure's end, the nobleman Bertilak proudly admits that he initiated the test and formulated its details. Bertilak, not by chance, confesses his responsibility for the spurious activism of the wife, who is revealed as a passive, submissive tool in the hands of her husband and her family to whom she is bound by absolute obedience. The seducing-wife test is used to check whether Gawain understands the taboos and their absolute limits.

The "faithfulness" test the young knight now undergoes is different from – and more difficult than – the first test. As opposed to the "belief test" in the first stage, in the second stage Gawain is unaware of the direct, close connection between the axe that threatens his throat (in the coming contest) and the restraint that he has to exert in the face of the tempting seductress. He does not understand that as long as the "mother" figure attracts, tempts and is sexual, the "father" remains a genuine threat to his life. The moment the

hero "passes" the test by overcoming his sexual desire for the wife, that is to say, demonstrates virtues, especially chastity and faithfulness to his hosts, he will, again, earn a double reward: first, he will save himself from the beheading; and second, success at this stage brings him one step closer to the glory and renown that he so desires.

We can summarize this intermediate stage in Harding's terms as follows: While the first stage is the test of "the I" (the conscious ego), in which Gawain is required to develop awareness of his inner spiritual world by means of a religious experience, the second stage is the test of dealing with the "not-I," and mainly consists of projection into the external world. In the course of this contest one leaves the boundaries of the "I" and inevitably finds oneself connected to an other, that is, the area of the "not-I" (Harding, 1993, p. 28). In "Sir Gawain," the "test" is created with the hero's confrontation with the presence of a woman who arouses in him a mixture of powerful feelings: torments of guilt, lust and sexual confusion, tension and sexual urges. This emotional storm forces the "son" to struggle with his animal instincts; only by virtue of his personal qualities does he ultimately choose to adhere to moral principles and the straight and narrow, or in Gawain's terms, he does not succumb as Samson did to Delilah or David to Bathsheba (lines 2417-9).

By standing firmly and determinedly in the "faithfulness" test, Gawain crystallizes in his consciousness a moral, religious inner injunction that enables him to open his eyes and differentiate between good and bad. The sharp perception of the clear limits of the cultural values expected from him lead the hero to the decisive knowledge that these kinds of drives have no place in his being; he thus resolutely detaches himself from them. Now, he is prepared and mature enough for the third and last stage of the contest.

The third mother figure revealed to him actually returns us to the beginning and also to the completion of the process. In the confession in the Chapel, the nobleman Bertilak de Hautdesert admits to Sir Gawain that the whole adventure is the work of the deceiving enchantress Morgan le Fay (lines 2446-7): "*Thurgh might of Morgne la Faye, that in my hous lenges,/ And koyntyse of clergye bi craftes wel lerned.*" [by the might of Morgane le Fay that in my mansion dwelleth,/ and by cunning of lore and crafts well learned.] Morgan, he says, is to blame for the events: it was she who conceived of the idea and sent him to King Arthur's court in the disguise of the green savage. She did this, Bertilak says, for two reasons: First, to test the honor of the Knights of the Round Table, and second, to shock Queen Guinevere, her arch antagonist. Morgan le Fay, he explains, wanted to cause the queen to die of shock ("*gart hit to dyye*") on the appearance of a figure resembling a green ghost (lines 2446-62). Albert Friedman in his article *Morgan le Fay in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (1966, pp. 135-158) sees this reasoning as the weak link in the plot, claiming that Morgan le Fay's presence and the imposition of all the "blame" on her is contrived, superfluous, unnecessary and contributes little to advancing the plot: "She bears all the signs and the *numen* of a *dea ex machine*, and in falling back upon such a device the poet betrays his difficulty in articulating the complex narrative framework of his poem."

In the age of gender studies and feminism, however, it is no longer possible to evade the essential question: How could an English poet, whose target audience, the medieval nobility of the 14th century – the stronghold of a misogynistic male society that defines Orthodox Christian ethics and morals as a central plot axis – allow a woman to be the dominant character and even declare this quite openly? Morgan le Fay, according to Bertilak's testimony, is the moving force in

the plot, controlling this man, and, until the confession stage, creating in the reader the impression of an invincible super-human.⁸ The solution to this conundrum touches on the unique role of this dominant and controversial character in the overall tapestry of the triple Mothers and the triple Fathers.

Thematically, the relationships between the "family members" in the story rest on the two-sided nature of the familiar character from the archetypal structures of many legends and tales. Anthropologists, psychologists and folklorists, such as Bruno Bettelheim and Joseph Campbell have devoted much attention to the complexity of family relationships, especially between mother and son, a relationship loaded with positive and negative interwoven (Bettelheim, 1989; Campbell, 1973). Harding defines this complexity as a source of "both positive and negative elements and are the cause of all sorts of rivalries as well as of loyalties" (52). She claims that consciously negative struggles (arguments, squabbles and even a feeling of inferiority and envy), develop quite often when "the children are quite incapable of leaving home, even though they have reached an age when it would be expected that they would go off on their own" (52). These struggles are clearly expressed in the substitution of family members in the real world with archetypes from the world of the imagination. In this process of transformation, the fictional character of the stepmother (as in Hansel and Gretel, Cinderella, and Snow White) fulfills the "negative function," a metaphorical expression of the inadequate functioning of the biological mother. In our story, the poet emphasizes that Morgan le Fay is King Arthur's stepsister and the aunt of Sir Gawain ("*Ho is even thyn aunt,*" lines 2462-5), or, in other words,

⁸ Compare with Kittredge who claims that Morgan le Fay is the moving cause of the entire plot. (Kittredge, 1916, p. 136).

makes a transformation from the absent biological mother to a second-degree female relative.

The anthropological interpretation of the unconscious transformation of family belonging in the folk tale and its distinctive application in our story lead us to conclude that the three different women describe different aspects of a single complex mother figure, whose structural symmetry parallels the trio of the father figures. The dual image of the nobleman Bertilak de Hautdesert creates tension the "son's" mind, a consequence of the gap between the human image of the "father," who offers Gawain protection, a warm home and emotional support, and his threatening green image in which he resembles a giant, demonic savage interested only in beheading the young and popular knight. This dual image is paralleled in the feminine by the role of Morgan the fairy, and the reversal of her image as the Virgin Mary. In order not to tarnish the name of the positive "mother figure," the poet describes a negative, manipulative and obstructive figure that ostensibly plays the same archetypal role as the "stepmother" in fairy tales. The one face turns toward the spiritual world (internal and unconscious) and is represented by the character of the Holy Mother, while the other face turns toward the material world (external and conscious), represented by the elusive character of Morgan the fairy. The one character lacks worldly goods, while the other abounds in gold and silver (lines 1251-5) -in the seduction stage the beautiful wife offers Gawain great riches if he will respond to her advances, referring to the riches of her husband, who, as mentioned, is under Morgan's control). This duality combines passivity and activity, sheltered spirituality and aggression and instinct, and also Christian belief and ancient, pagan beliefs.⁹

⁹ On the mythological figure of Morgan le Fay, see: Gurevitch, 2005.

In his confessions, Bertilak places full responsibility for the events on the fairy, claiming that the act was motivated by a conspiracy against King Arthur and his court, and an old quarrel between Morgan the fairy and Queen Guinevere (lines 2446-62). The tone of his confessions are reminiscent of the claims of the 13th century theologian Thomas Aquinas, who accused women of capricious, unmindful behavior that leads them to perform impulsive acts lacking logic (*ratio*), intelligence (*intellectus*), or responsibility (Aquinas, 1944, pp. 880-881). However, while Bertilak's explanation would be agreeable to a 14th-century male who saw the feminine prototype in the spirit of Aquinas's doctrine, to a modern reader the claim sounds contrived and anti-women. Furthermore, the poet does not resolve the gap between the negative image of the fairy as a provocative witch, and the way she is defined and identified four lines later (line 2452) as "*Morgne þe goddess*." Moreover, in his first encounter with the fairy, Sir Gawain does not know the identity of this noble lady before him with wrinkled cheeks (*rankled chekes*, lines 951-60), but is prompted by the reverence that she induces in him to ask the lord of the castle's permission to greet her. When this request is granted, he kneels before her, until almost prostrate ("*the alder he haylses, heldande full lowe*," line 972). That during the splendid banquet the elderly lady sits on the elevated throne ("*The olde auncian wyf highest ho syttes*," line 1001) further attests to the status of this unidentified woman.

In the Christian Arthurian tradition, Morgan le Fay is a powerful sorceress, Merlin's pupil and King Arthur's half-sister, who dedicated her life to avenging the King and his knights. Her identity as a goddess, however, hints at her ancient pagan origins familiar from the popular Celtic tradition: Morrigan or Morrígú was a goddess known for her many attributes, and was worshipped by the ancient Celts [the Gaels and the

Britons]. Her other appellations include: Queen of the Fairies, The Great Queen, The Queen of the Spirits, The Queen of Healing, The Supreme Queen of War, and the Moon Queen.¹⁰ The potential meaning alluded to in Bertilak's words, links negative the image of the fairy in Arthurian tradition from the 12th century onward, the way she is venerated and her divine status in the ancient texts. This literary hint is the basis for unraveling the contextual entanglement.

It is most precise to define the powerful, complex and exciting sorceress, Morgan le Fay, as a deceiver. Deception and changes of form, the salient characteristics of her character, were fixed in consciousness and implanted in contemporary universal terminology, when, in 1818 the natural phenomenon "*Fata Morgana*" was given her name [*fata* means fairy], describing a rare, elevated dual mirage. This mirage, also known as *Chateau de Morgan le fay*, is a splendid structure that looks like an enchanted castle, partly submerged in water. The source of this optical illusion is assumed to be a combination of atmospheric circumstances in which rays of light are refracted in the air precisely at the point of differences in temperature characteristic of valleys surrounded by high mountains. According to popular Italian belief, which persists to this day, the fairy creates the illusion of the palace in order to impress her young lover.

The powerful and omnipotent fairy indeed initiates and plans the "beheading game." The traditional identity of Morgan le Fay as a symbol of illusion and deception plays an essential role in the plot, not, as the poet wishes to claim, because of her rivalry with the queen, but rather because she acts as a midwife. It is Morgan le Fay who arranges the young

Sir Gawain's ultimate test, the test of light. In the triangular family, Morgan le Fay plays the major role of mediator in the relationship between the individual and the other members of the family: she is the channel through which the internal, unconscious contents are projected onto objects in the clear and familiar external world. Outwardly, Morgan strives to destroy or upset the existing equilibrium by undermining the self-confidence of the members of the fighting patriarchal order; however her highly imaginative initiative for activating archetypes has the complete opposite result. Morgan, in fact, arouses what Harding defines as those "beneficial sources of energy that belong to the collective unconscious, that are capable of channeling the libido in constructive channels" (59). Morgan's test connects to Harding's interpretation regarding the detachment from the womb and the transition from darkness to light. Initially, the fairy creates an illusion that the vibrancy of the "green knight" is an essential, inseparable part of the required process. In the psychological meaning of consciousness, the aggressive, energetic appearance of the green savage arouses the young knight from his sleep or coma due to his protection in the "womb" of the court of the castle. The illusion of "the light" that bursts into the castle dazzles and disturbs in the same way that the sun rising in the morning rouses a person from a state of deep sleep or dulled senses. The hero is thus also given sufficient time (a year) to get used to the new conscious state or the "light" that has entered his life.

The development of individual, independent awareness in adolescence follows a hierarchy of stages and, in our story, is initially symbolized by means of the deadly weapon, the lethal axe, wielded by the green savage. The traumatic beheading ceremony interrupts in a single thrust a certain state of consciousness (separation of the placenta), and requires the hero to move to a new state of consciousness (the emergence

¹⁰ On the transformations of the character of Morgan le Fay, see among others: Squire, 1975; Paton, 1960; Harf-Lancner, 1984.

into fresh air). The beginning of the turning point is depicted in the plot by a withdrawal from the familiar and safe rationality (the king's court, the culture, the masculine), and later by the leap into unconscious territory (the forest, nature, the feminine). Compare with Ruth Netzer who emphasizes that: "The relinquishing of rational, conscious thinking is symbolized by the motif of the beheading. A beheading enables heroes in legends to free themselves from the spells that forced them to live a false and fictitious existence, and to discover their real nature. The rational "beheading" enables the removal of the rational-intellectual-conscious position, in order to encounter the irrational, the emotional, the intuitive and the instinctual, in other words, to encounter the unconscious authentic truth and the suffering and the great sorrow of the soul in the vast depths, which give birth to the existence of the self." (my translation, Netzer, 2004, p. 200).

Interestingly, according to Arthurian tradition, the date of the annual meeting of the Knights of the Round Table is the evening of Pentecost. In "Sir Gawain," on the other hand, the Green Knight first appears at Camelot on Christmas Eve and remains during the New Year celebrations (lines 37, 60, 1998-9). This exceptional choice of Christian time signifiers according to which the cycle of resurrection-torments as well as the death/crucifixion-resurrection of Jesus takes place, also teaches about the complete life cycle that the fairy designates for Gawain. The central role of Morgan the fairy in the story, therefore, imparts a thematic integrity to her controversial image, hated by the patriarchal intervention of medieval society. From a symbolic psychological perspective, Morgan in "Sir Gawain" returns to her original role as the cyclical

moon goddess. She is the goddess that kills in order to revive, and who revives in order to kill.¹¹

Morgan the goddess conducts a "nature" test using the green savage, who is also the representative of "culture." The challenge she sets thus combines the sun and the moon, the feminine essence and the masculine essence. The choice of the color green for the deception also fits the conceptual sequence, green being a dominant symbol of nature, growth and renewal. The choice of green also attests to the ontological essence of the young contender's process of adolescence-arousal.¹²

Initiation and the I

Analyzing the sequence of events teaches that the encounter in the Green Chapel, which initially seems to be the climax of the contest, is no more than a graduation ceremony in the course of which a representative of "culture" (in the name of the goddess) presents the outstanding graduate of the initiation process with a report card and summary assessment. We can only conclude that the hero's real test was not to overcome the green savage in the Green Chapel; rather, the test began with Gawain's request of King Arthur to allow him to compete against the Green Knight at Camelot, and it ended a year later when he presented himself at the Green Chapel and confidently called to the green savage, as required, to strike him. The three raisings of the Green Knight's axe are equivalent to the three tests that he successfully completed. The cut left

¹¹ In addition to the threefold division, Robert Graves suggests a further fivefold division of the stages of initiation: birth, initiation, consummation, repose, and death. See: Graves, 2000, p. 485. See another example of the beheading motif—of Jesus as the successor to John the Baptist after his head had been cut off (op. cit. 423, 180).

¹² Compare with: "none greater in the universe than the triple Goddess!" Has been made implicitly or explicitly by all true Muse-poets since poetry began." Graves, pp 476-7.

by the Green Knight's axe on Sir Gawain's neck with the third and final blow does not attest to mental impairment for which the wound is punishment. On the contrary, the "sign" that the green savage leaves on Gawain's flesh is the sign of the victor – eternal testimony to the courage he displayed. In the Arthurian literature, scars, wounds and particularly bleeding, are regarded as an inseparable part of the knight's bravery in battle. For example, Sir Lancelot, the pre-eminent knight, in *Lancelot le Chevalier à la Charrette*, a 12th century romance by Chrétien de Troyes, crosses the destroyed bridge, his hands and knees bleeding, and elicits cries of enthusiasm from those present. In another case, in the poetess Marie de France's lai *Yonec*, also from the 12th century, the wounding and the fatal bleeding of the knight-hawk Muldumarec serves as a powerful poetic tool for demonstrating his bravery and his fortitude. Furthermore, and no less important, the scars that remain on Sir Gawain's neck will serve as testimony to his legitimate human weakness. According to Harding, the ability to activate free will is an inseparable part of a person's freedom. Sir Gawain, whose virtues are known to all (as attested to by the Knights of the Round Table prior to his departure, and in the words of the tempting wife), is not divine and is certainly not perfect. His submission to the tempting wife's suggestion to take the girdle that would protect his life is like the "essential sin" (*felix culpa*) (196), lines 2366-8: "*Bot here yow lakked a lyttel, sir, and lewté yow wonted; Bot that was for no wylyde werke, ne wowing nauther,; Bot for ye lufed your lyf- the lasse yow blame.*" [But that was for no artful wickedness, nor for wooing either/ but because you loved your own life: the less do I blame you].

The love of life and the fear of death, a clear primeval anxiety shared by all human beings, brought about this moral lapse, making him worthy of bearing it proudly. Finally, as a prize for his achievements, on the

same festive occasion the nobleman grants him the green girdle as a memento, and then takes his leave of him. Sir Gawain, who, just a month previously left as a terrified and embarrassed youth, now returns to Camelot as a hardened and level-headed adult to the acclamation of the delighted Knights of the Order of the Round Table.

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