

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: Tolkien's "game with rules"

I am going to talk about three statements Tolkien made about *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and then use them to examine why Gawain's reaction is so different from Bertilak's. All three quotations are on the [handout](#), along with passages from *SGGK*. The first Tolkien passage, and the first passage on your handout, is from Tolkien and Gordon's first edition of *SGGK*. Tolkien wrote:

green was a fairy colour, and suitable for such a being as this knight, whose Green Chapel was nothing else than a fairy mound; a *balz berz*. (Tolkien, J. R. R. and E. V. Gordon. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1925. 86 n. 151).

There are two key points in this statement:

1. First, Green is a fairy color and thus appropriate for this knight.
2. Second, The Green Chapel was nothing else than a fairy mound; a *balz berz*

I'll discuss these two points separately, looking first at Tolkien's assertion that green is a fairy color.

I suspect that there has been more ink, of various colors, spent on why the Green Knight is green than on any other topic, with some reason. The emphasis, in terms of the Green Knight's appearance, is very much on his greenness, the greenness of his horse, his hair, clothing and gear. In 1960 Kittredge made the seemingly definitive statement that "Much has also been made by scholars, from time to time, of the greenness of the challenger, for everybody is aware that green is a fairy color" (1960, 140). You'd think a statement like Kittredge's, after Tolkien's assertion, would settle the question, but Kittredge then precedes to devote five more pages to green. His efforts to catalog and elucidate the meaning of green have been augmented by legions of scholars writing about green as a fairy color, green as a vegetation color, green as the color of life, green as the color

of death and mourning and the devil . . .

I think Tolkien is right about green as a fairy color. We have many references to fairies and green, but I shall be charitable and only refer to three. In the ballad “Thomas the Rhymer” the fairy Queen's skirt “was o’ the grass-green silk” (Child 37). In the twelfth century Ralph of Coggestall and William of Newbridge tell stories about mysterious green otherworld children. The *Sidhe*, the Irish otherworld residents, have a pronounced fondness for green, second only to red, one of the other colors associated with the Green Knight.

Numerous scholars, most notably D.W. Robertson Jr., have documented other wearers of green besides fairies, particularly the devil. Robertson, who describes the Green Knight as an overtly Christian symbol, also observes that the devil in *Chaucer’s Friar’s Tale* wears green as a hunter of human souls.

The current consensus is that supernatural beings (especially fairies) tend to wear green, and that green is also appropriate for hunting, whether mortal or mammalian, and a sensible color for foresters—witness Chaucer's Yeoman who "was clad in cote and hood of grene" (General Prologue l. 103). Given that fairies hunt both mortal and animal game, certainly, they, and the Green Knight, are entitled to wear green as hunters, apart from any Fey partiality for the color.

Before turning to Tolkien’s assertion that the Green Chapel is “nothing else than a fairy mound; a balz berz” I want to talk about how Gawain *gets* to the Green Chapel.

Once Gawain accepts the Green Knight's challenge and severs the Green Knight's head, Gawain must fulfill his oath to meet the Green Knight a year later on New Year’s day at the Green Chapel, a place whose location he does not know. Gawain travels along the coast from North Wales, hazarding the wilderness of Wirral (l. 701), before fording the river Dee and going off the map to “contrayez straunge” (l. 713) inhabited by "wormez," “wolues,” and “wodwos” (ll. 720-721).

On December 24th Gawain passes through marshy bog land and finds himself in a forest of old trees. It is misty, cold, wet, and thoroughly unpleasant (ll. 741-47). The climate is an otherworld marker. The trees named by the poet are all associated with fairies and the otherworld in folklore and medieval literature. The roots of oaks were thought to reach the otherworld. Hazel and hawthorn trees are often guarded by a fairy knight who warns off human intruders. The hawthorn or “Whitethorn,” is the favored meeting place of fairies in folklore and French romance.

The specificity with which the trees are mentioned, and the fact that Gawain is no longer following a known route, suggest that Gawain is now in the otherworld, in a fairy forest. In the midst of this wilderness, Gawain prays that he might find a place to hear mass. After he has crossed himself three times, the castle of Hautdesert magically appears. It isn't unusual for a knight in a romance to fortuitously stumble on a castle that offers him hospitality. What's unusual is the miraculously well-timed appearance of the castle “In answer to prayer,” as Tolkien says.

Gawain's passage from wilderness to an otherworldly palace that is the height of civilization and urbane companionship is typical of an otherworld journey. Like otherworld dwellings everywhere, this is a supernaturally fine castle; it is “the comliest castle that ever knight owned.” We are told that “hit schemered and schon þ ur þe schyre okez” (772), a shining effect typical of otherworld places and architecture.

Inside the castle, Gawain is courteously welcomed. On his third day at the castle Gawain explains that he is searching for the Green chapel “And þe kn3yt þat hit kepes, of colour of grene” (l. 1059). His host Bertilak laughs and assures Gawain that the chapel “is not two myle henne” (l. 1078) and Gawain can rest until New Year's and arrive at the Green Chapel “at midmorn” (l. 1073).

Since the Chapel “is not two myle henne” (l. 1078), it is likely that the Green Chapel is also an otherworld location. Nonetheless, numerous scholars attempt to locate the Green Chapel in this world, despite Tolkien's assertion that the Green Chapel “was nothing else than a fairy mound; a

bal ber,” which brings me to Tolkien's second point in that first quotation.

On the morning of New Year's Day, Gawain's guide leads him to the Green Chapel through rough, rocky, hilly country. Eventually Gawain arrives at an area that is comparatively smooth, where he sees the scene in passage two on your handout. Andrew & Waldron paraphrase that passage thusly

at a short distance across a glade, a sort of knoll, a smooth-surfaced barrow (*ber3*) on the side of (*bi*) a slope beside the water's edge, by the channel (*for3*) of a stream which passed there; the burn surged in it (i.e. the channel) as if it were boiling (Andrew & Waldron 286 n. 2171-74).

The *ber3* is a “mound” according to Davis (TG-Davis 165) a “barrow, mound” (Andrew & Waldron 304), or as the *MED* has it, citing this line, “A hill; a mound, barrow” (*MED* *bergh*). The poet describes a glade containing a hill or barrow, and a fast running stream in front.

I've placed this next passage on your handout as passage three. Notice the details; the *ber3* has a hole in the end, and one in either side. It is covered with grass, and hollow, like a cave “Or a creuisse of an olde cragge” (l. 2184). Earlier Gawain observes that the *ber3* is “ouergrown wi þ gresse in glodes anywhere” (l. 2181); a bit later Gawain adds that “þis oritore is vgly, wi þ erbez ouergrown” (l. 2190). After stating that the *ber3* is covered with green, he notes that it is an appropriate location for the *þe wy3e wruxled in grene* (l. 2191), that is, the wight wrapped (or clad) in green.

If we think about a hollow mound covered in green with a hole in the side, and one at either end, we have something very like a fairy mound, or barrow. It is in fact very appropriate for a green otherworld resident to be found at a “a fairy mound” as Tolkien says.

We have examined two assertions from Tolkien, each supported by the text, and by other scholars; that green is a fairy color, and that the Green Chapel is a fairy mound. Tolkien's third assertion that the Green Chapel is a mound “suitable for such a being as this knight,” suggests that the

Green Knight is a big green fairy, or otherworld intruder.

I want to turn now to the fourth passage on the handout, the second of my three Tolkien quotations; this time from Tolkien's 1953 W. P. Ker Memorial lecture.

Now we, and no doubt many of our poet's audience, may not be surprised by [the Green Knight riding off holding his severed head]. If we are introduced to a green man, with green hair and face, on a green horse, at the court of King Arthur, we expect "magic"; and Arthur and Gawain should have expected it also, we think. As indeed most of those present seem to have done: "a phantom and fay-magic folk there thought it" (l. 2400). ("Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" in Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Monsters and the Critics*. London: Harper Collins, 1990. 75).

Tolkien makes several key points in this passage:

1. First, we shouldn't be surprised that a green man on a green horse at Arthur's court can ride off holding his severed head.
2. Second, nor should Arthur and Gawain be surprised. They, and we, should expect magic from such a figure at such a place.
3. Third, those present seem to have expected magic; we are told that the Green Knight is "a phantom and fay-magic folk there thought it" (ll. 240).

Let's first look more closely at line 240, the line Tolkien translates as "a phantom and fay-magic folk there thought it." You'll see it as passage five on your handout.

Fantoum and fayrye is a formulaic phrase in Middle English lyrics, and in *Libeaus Desconus*. For *fantoum* in terms of meaning, we have "illusion" from Davis (TG-Davis 179) and Burrow (Burrow 1972, 93, n. 240), and even the *MED* which offers "That which deludes the senses or imagination; illusion (as of dream or hallucination)" and cites this line (*MED* *fantom* 2. (a)).

For *fayrye* Davis suggests "magic," as does Burrow (Burrow 1972, 93, n. 240). Andrew and Waldron

favor “the supernatural” (A & W 317); Silverstein glosses fayrye as “illusion” (205 fayrye). The *MED* suggests “Supernatural contrivance; enchantment, magic, illusion; also, something illusory, a phantom; (b) something incredible or fictitious, a figment” (*MED* fare 2(a-b)). Tolkien has “wherefore a phantom and fay-magic folk there thought it” (Tolkien 1980, 26). As Tolkien says, the Green Knight is perceived by the court as a creature of illusion and magic.

What’s more, after securing Gawain's oath to accept his return blow at the Green Chapel, the Green Knight leaves even more inexplicably than he arrived. Carrying his head in his hands, he exits the hall in typical otherworldly style by going, well, no one knows where he goes. The narrator’s description of the disappearance “To quat kyth he becom knwe non þere, / Neuer more þen þay wyste from queen he watz wonnen” (ll. 460-61) is an example of a “fairy formula.” Later the narrator refers to the Green Knight leaving the Green Chapel “And þe knyht in þe enker-grene / Whiderwarde-so-euer he wolde” (ll. 2477-78), again using a formula. Our final impression of the Green Knight emphasizes his color, the fairy formula firmly connecting the Green Knight's color with his otherworld origins.

We’ve looked at Tolkien’s assertions that green is a fairy color, and that the green chapel is a fairy mound. We've also looked at his statement that we, and the court, should expect magic from the Green Knight. I want to talk now about a third Tolkien quotation. This next passage, the sixth on your handout, is about games.

We have in fact reached the point of intersection of two different planes: of a real and permanent, and an unreal and passing world of values: morals in one hand, and in the other a code of honour, or a game with rules (“Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” in Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Monsters and the Critics*. London: Harper Collins, 1990. 89).

The “real and permanent” is Arthur’s court, which Tolkien associates with morals. The “unreal and passing world of values” is the world of the Green Knight, Hautdesart and the Green Chapel,

which Tolkien associates with “a code of honour, or a game with rules.”

There are lots of games in *SGGK*, including festive Christmas games played at Camelot and at Hautdesart, the Exchange of Blows, the Exchange of Winnings, and the hunts Bertilak pursues while Gawain engages in courtship games with Bertilak's lady. Principally, Tolkien is concerned with the Exchange of Winnings game between Gawain and Bertilak. Tolkien, just after the passage we're concerned with, explains that

The more [games] deal with or become involved with real affairs and duties, the more moral bearings they will have; the things “done” or “not done” will have two sides, the ritual or rules of the game, and the eternal rules; and therefore the more occasions for a dilemma, a conflict of rules. And the more seriously you take your games, the severer and more painful the dilemma (“Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” in Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Monsters and the Critics*. London: Harper Collins, 1990. 89).

The green girdle Gawain accepts from Bertilak's lady ties the courtship games Gawain plays with Bertilak's lady to the Exchange of Winnings game he plays with Bertilak. Gawain accepts the girdle believing that it will save his life in the exchange of blows with the Green Knight. In terms of morality, given his oath to exchange his gains, and in terms of the rules of the game, Gawain ought to have given the girdle to Bertilak as part of his “winnings” for the day. There is, in the Exchange of Winnings game a “conflict of rules” for Tolkien, as well as for Gawain, who takes his game playing very seriously indeed.

Gawain violates the rules of the exchange by retaining the girdle. Gawain sees his rule violation as a moral issue in that he violated his trawe. For Bertilak, it is merely a game. As he explains to Gawain

“Bot here yow lakked a lyttel, sir, and lewte yow wanted;
Bot þat watz for no wylyde werke, ne wowyng nau þer,

Bot for þe lufed your lyf; þe lasse I yow blame” (ll. 2366-68).

Bertilak gives Gawain a “nirt in þe nek” (l. 2498), and is satisfied with the conclusion of the game; Gawain, however, is not satisfied at all.

Now, I’m going to take Tolkien’s points, and build on them by tying Tolkien’s points to game theory. Here, in summary, are Tolkien’s assertions:

1. Green was a fairy colour, and suitable for a knight whose Green Chapel was a fairy mound.
2. If we are introduced to a green man on a green horse, at the court of King Arthur, we expect “magic” as do most of those at Camelot.
3. The narrator tells us, regarding the Green Knight, that “a phantom and fay-magic folk there thought it.”
4. There is a distinction to be made in *SGGK* between a real and permanent world and an unreal and passing world.
5. These worlds have values that are based on morals in one world, and in the other a code of honour, or a game with rules.

So, to conclude, let’s use Tolkien’s points to consider the role of the Green Knight and Bertilak as an otherworld being, a fairy, if you like, who plays games with Gawain, a mortal. The *MED* lists six central meanings for the word game (*MED* game) including mirth; pastime, hunting, amorous play, lovemaking; athletic contests, chess, etc.; a joke, a ridiculous circumstance; a plan, scheme, trick; and game animals, birds or fish. All of these kinds of game are present in *SGGK*.

Bertilak, if not a fairy, is at least an otherworld being whom Morgan transformed into the Green Knight and sent to Arthur for the exchange of blows game, whereupon Bertilak demonstrated the efficacy of his own severed head with speech, in order to frighten Guinevere, madden the court, and test their sourquydrye (ll. 2456-60). Yet while Morgan is responsible for both the appearance of the Green Knight, and the beheading game, Bertilak is responsible for the lady’s courtship game, the exchange of winnings, and the girdle.

Fairies are inveterate game-players, “game” being defined very broadly in terms of the *MED* definitions. In works like the romance of *Thomas of Erceldoune*, *Sir Orfeo*, “Tam Lin” and *Lanval*, fairies are known to take mortals to the otherworld for purposes of amatory game, as duly hunted mortal prey. Fairies indulge in games of sport like hunting and hawking and games of chance and strategy. They lure mortals to the otherworld, for diabolic sacrifices, or because an otherworld resident needs a mortal for a particular purpose (midwives, wet nurses, and mortal champions). Bertilak is typical of otherworld beings in his pursuit of mortals as game, and as opponents and participants in fairy games.

The difficulty with mortals playing games with fairies, aside from the fact that mortals are, well, mortal, and fairies tend not to be, and thus ride away carrying their own severed heads, for instance, is that fairies are truly other and alien. Thus their perceptions of games are different. Otherworld folk are very much concerned with the rules, with rigid adherence to rules, whether the rules are those of a game, or of a law code. Fairies don't see their games as their mortal prey and opposition do. In the fairy game-view, more than one side, more than one player, can win if the players play by the rules. Fairy morality depends on obeying rules and the letter of the law. In Tolkien's terms, Bertilak is playing by “a code of honour, or a game with rules.” Gawain is interested in the moral aspect. It is a game for Bertilak, who as the Green Knight is capable of walking away carrying his severed head, while it is a “real and permanent matter of life” and death for Gawain. They are in a sense playing different games; Gawain is playing to win, to live; Bertilak is playing for Morgan's reasons, and, well, for fun.

Now, for game theory. A “zero-sum game” in game theory is a game which can only be successfully played if someone wins, and someone loses. Writing about the ancient Greek fondness for agon, Alvin Gouldner notes that “The zero-sum game will engender more bitterness and a greater inclination to win at any cost, even if this requires violating the rules.”

Bertilak, like most fairies, is not playing a zero-sum game. However, Gawain, a mortal, is. Note

that Gawain is deeply ashamed, humiliated and furious when Bertilak confronts him with his failure to keep his troth regarding the exchange of winnings. Gawain can't accept that the game is a game. He is too deeply involved, since his life is, as far as he knows, at stake. He isn't capable of "losing gracefully." For Gawain, his failure is a humiliating loss. Bertilak, on the other hand, is ready to shake hands and return to Hautdesert. What to Gawain, enmeshed in his desperate zero-sum game, constitutes a serious and humiliating moral failure, to Bertilak is merely a move in a different kind of game: it is *serio ludere*, serious play, to be sure, but play nonetheless. Other mortals playing games with otherworld folk, like Pwyll, Thomas of Erceldoune and Orfeo, understand the nature of fairy gaming; they obey the rules, and they therefore "win" just as much as their otherworld opponents win.

Unfortunately, Gawain doesn't quite get it.