

“Wiles of a Women:” Challenging Roles and Agency in Sir Gawain and
the Green Knight

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Sir Gawain and the Green Knight subversively place women in positions of power, though their agency is not immediately visible. This poem is a 14th-century text written by an unnamed poet, set within the Court of King Arthur. This work features notable figures of the Round Table, with Sir Gawain, the knight, in the forefront. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a written illustration of the heroes of the Court of Arthur. However, it can also be seen as an early example of a text providing women with power and agency. The power women possess within the tale is hidden until the end of the poem, when it is revealed that Morgan le Fay was behind the games and quest that Gawain endured. This agency women were given is juxtaposed with some of the reactionary views within the text. This can stand to represent the insecurities that were most likely felt during the period this tale was written in, and Gawain is the mode with which these insecurities and fears of powerful women are demonstrated. Considering these elements, this story can take on a new light as a progressive text for the time it was written. The unnamed poet can stand to be seen as an early progressive author who worked to elevate women within their work to a higher-level status.

For most of the text, women are represented and described in a way typical for the period. Guenevere is described in a way that makes her seem akin to an object rather than a person, in the description: “Guenevere the goodly queen gay in the midst / On a dais well decked and duly arrayed / with costly silk curtains, a canopy over, / ...Fair queen, without a flaw.” (lines 74-81) In this description, Guenevere is described as something to be looked at and admired. She is shown less as a person and more as a show of wealth and beauty in the court of Arthur. In this way, she is helping improve Arthur’s image of power and wealth by being objectified. As Sheila Fisher claims in her article, “Leaving Morgan Aside: Women, History, and Revisionism in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” she further supports this idea of commodifying Guenevere in her

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passage, “She is utterly static. She simply sits and looks, and, perhaps more importantly, she is looked upon... It is difficult to distinguish Guenevere and her worth from that of her splendid accouterments... a token of Arthur’s wealth.” (Fisher, 133-134) This passage from Fisher helps to support the idea of Guenevere being looked upon by others and being used and seen as a symbol of Arthur’s wealth and status rather than being observed as her own person.

Another instance of a woman overlooked within the text, who holds power, is the older woman from the castle in the forest. When at dinner, Gawain is seated by the gay lady and the older woman. The “old ancient lady” (line 1001), as she is referred to, is one of the figures within the story who holds power, and yet Gawain does not pay any mind to her and is instead distracted by the gay lady. He and the lady, “were accorded so closely in company therefore, / with the seemly solace of their secret words / and speeches well sped, spotless and pure...” (lines 1011-1013). Gawain should have interacted and made conversation with the older woman out of respect for her age and authority. In the poet having him ignore the older woman and focus on the younger, attractive woman in the room, the text is already working to show some of Gawain’s mistakes regarding agency and power. The lady also has her own secret agency, yet Gawain is so enamored by how beautiful she is he does not realize the control she has. In the text, she is first shown spending time with Gawain, trying to convince him to kiss her and possibly move beyond that. She, at first, can be read as a woman chasing her desires and wants by pursuing Gawain. Her advances are described in the text as, “My body is here at hand,/ your each wish to fulfill;/ your servant to command/ I am, and shall be still.” (lines 1236-1240). These lines demonstrate the language and word use the lady is utilizing to get what she wants, at least, it seems like at first. By the end, readers know this is part of a larger scheme, but it seems she is pursuing her desires here. These examples are nullified at the revelation of Morgan’s

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orchestration of the ruse of the Green Knight, and the agency of the women within the text are elevated.

When the story is revealed in truth, Gawain learns that Morgan created the plan for all of the games and deals that Gawain was a part of and that she had the Lord’s wife in on the plan.

These revelations instantly give the story a twist, as women are suddenly the driving forces behind these events and not the men that were assumed to be in charge. This gives the two women behind the scheme (Morgan and the Lord’s wife) a new sense of agency and power within the text. The wooing of Gawain takes on new meaning, as readers can now see that these attempts by the Lord’s wife were all calculated and planned by Morgan and herself. Gawain had

little to no power over the situation; pre-ordained and preplanned events caused a lack of mutability to the wooing. Gawain is then informed that Morgan was present the whole time and was the old woman he had been sitting with at the dinner table but had not paused to get to know. When it is revealed to Gawain that the Green Knight is not behind the game and quest, he responds in the only way he seems to be able to and degrades women in general. His speech discredits all the agency these women earned and returns readers to the period in which this was

written. The passage reads: “But if a dullard should dote, deem it no wonder,

And through the wiles of a woman be wooed into sorrow,

For so was Adam by one, when the world began,

And Solomon by many more, and Samson the mighty

Delilah was his doom, and David, thereafter

Was beguiled by Bathsheba, and bore much distress;

Now these were vexed by their devices- ‘twere a very joy

could one but learn to love, and believe them not.” (2414-2421).

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Gawain uses numerous instances to support his claim of men being “wooded into sorrow” by women. Beginning with Adam, he works his way through Samson and David to help illuminate his misogynistic message about women. Gawain then tries to gain pardon for himself, in the lines: “And one and all fell prey / to women that they had used; / If I be led astray, / Methinks I may be excused.” (lines 2425-2428) This quotation shows Gawain comparing himself to these other “proud princes” (line 2422) who had been tricked by women, and claims that if it had also happened to them, he should be excused for any transgressions that occurred because of a woman. Gawain, in this section, stands to represent the views at the time on women and their “wiles.” The poet uses Gawain here to contrast with the progressive ideas being represented. Gawain’s arguments can be held in question, though, as to whether Gawain is acting out of irritation or anger at being “bested by women,” so to speak, or as an attempt to resecure his own power and agency. By saying this quote that degrades the actions and abilities of the women within the story, he works to use this example to rebuild his own ego and agency in society. By breaking down these women, he is, in turn, building up his own agency and rekindling his sense of possibly damaged masculinity. Gawain’s insecurity regarding female empowerment can be seen reflected during this period, specifically in historian Merry Wiesner’s essay, “Women’s Defense of Their Public Role.” In this essay, Wiesner defines freedoms for women as “the word ‘free’ would rarely have been used when referring to women. ‘Free’ meant enjoying the rights and privileges of a citizen and possessing an educated capacity for reason, neither of which was possible for women.” (Wiesner 2) Wiesner also explains how women were constricted in the spheres they were able to participate in; specifically, public spheres were typically limited for women during this period. Taking this into account, Gawain can be seen as uncomfortable and uneasy with these women's sudden power. Not only do they hold power, but it is without

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question that they do so. They are not shown struggling to gain or maintain this agency, aside from Gawain’s misogynistic outburst that stemmed from a damaged ego and some toxic masculinity.

Gawain’s attempt to save his own agency represents some of the issues within a progressive text such as this. He and his perspective can stand to represent the views and mindset of society in this period and show the general distaste for this type of message invoked by readers at the time. Readers likely felt his insecurities, as this type of message and theme of empowering women was jarring to Gawain and likely to others reading this text. By representing both a progressive text which grants women agency and power, buttressed by a representation of societal reaction, the poet gives readers a full scope of what effects this work could have. Not only was this text provocative in its representation of women in powerful roles, but it also showed the negativity and drawbacks that could come from a work such as this.

The way women function and are presented within the text can be analyzed in a few different ways, as Fisher demonstrates in her article. Fisher argues that the text erases the presence of women to show how they are the key to the downfall of the Round Table. Fisher argues that the poem “erases women,” as a way to show the Round Table could have been saved if women did not interfere, which is echoed in: “If women could be placed in the periphery, as Morgan is in this poem, then the Round Table might not have fallen. To deny the female would be to save the kingdom, and, in its revisionary agenda, that is precisely what Sir Gawain and the Green Knight attempts to do.” (Fisher, 131). Fisher here is emphasizing the marginalization of women within the text, and while this seems central to her argument, she does not ponder why the women may be central to this plot, to begin with. The hidden intentions of the poet can be seen as much deeper and more meaningful for “leaving Morgan aside” than to what Fisher

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alludes. By postponing the moment when the reader discovers who is behind the plot, readers are made to come to terms with their own biases and preconceived notions that the Green Knight has to be the one in charge, and that Gawain, one of the most respected knights, has to be correct about what he believes to be the truth. By not hinting at all within the poem of a secret agency that women hold, readers are learning alongside Gawain the power that these female figures held.

The marginalization of women can be used to reinforce the power and agency these figures held within the text and reinforce the importance that this news holds within the work. By taking a text that seems so masculine in nature, with cutting off heads, quests, and trying to uphold the qualities of a knight, the sudden turn to the feminine at the end works to break down these strict stratifications that this social structure the text works within holds. It works to make a space for women within a predominantly masculine sphere, like the court of King Arthur, and shows that powerful women can also have a place at the Table. While Fisher may have some opinions on the text that can be seen as insightful, this opinion on the function of women within the text removes the power and ability from them that this text provides.

Within this text, the poet places women in roles of power and agency, unlike other works at this time. While they are shown controlling the plot and properly showing Gawain the purpose of this game, Gawain blames his personal errors on women and their wiles and does not take any personal responsibility for his mistakes. In this way, Gawain contrasts the progressive message the poet is offering on women and power, and he stands to represent what the opinions were at the time of the poem. This text does a wonderful job of, at first, showing women in unassuming roles and not having any power and suddenly flips this idea to present readers with new and progressive views on women and their capabilities. This power given to women helps to

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challenge these traditionally masculine spheres. It works to suggest what may happen if powerful, strong women wanted to be heard and have the abilities that men within the text have. The poet can be seen as not only suggesting this idea but providing a text which can be read in such a way as to begin the conversation.

References

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