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Anti-Semitism in *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight*

Sir Gawain and The Green Knight is a romance from the fourteenth century that contains four religious poems. As explicated by Lynn Staley Johnson, the events of the poem parallel the holidays of the liturgical calendar, which implies that there is a Christian significance behind Sir Gawain's actions. Furthermore, the poem contains religious symbols that demonstrate the importance of Christianity in the Middle Ages; for instance, Gawain's shield is decorated with an image of the Virgin Mary and a Pentangle to remind him of his Christian and knightly virtues. Yet Gawain is a poor knight, and moreover, a poor Christian. Not only does he violate chivalry by lying to Lord Bertilak, but he violates Christianity by receiving circumcision in a fake chapel. Conversely, perhaps Gawain is not entirely to blame, for his downfall is prompted by the Green Knight. It is the verdant giant that sends Gawain on his quest, and it is the fear he induces that leads Gawain to sin. Additionally, the Green Knight is described like an Easterner, and he proposes a game that intimidates chivalry. His presence portrays Christianity's historical enemy, the Jews, and his physiognomy parallels anti-semitic descriptions of Jews in the Middle Ages. *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight* is a manifestation of the medieval anxiety surrounding Jews, and the Green Knight represents the Jew that taints Englishness, Christianity, and all that is chivalric.

The Green Knight's physiognomy resembles the stereotypical Jew of anti-Semitic discourse. The infamous Aquiline Jew-nose was fairly newer in the 14th century, but the Knight does possess "heavy hair" (Borroff 183) on his head, "fair flowing tresses" (Borroff 181) on his

shoulders, “a beard as big as a bush” on his breast (Borroff 182) and “bristling brows” (Borroff 305). Jews have long been depicted with thick hair due to their ancestral traits from the Middle East. Even today, “Jewfro” is a colloquial term that people use to describe thick and curly Jewish hair. Similarly, Jews have long been depicted as “materialistic”, “greedy” or “money-hungry” due to their history as money lenders, which dates back to before the birth of Christ. The Green Knight represents the “materialistic Jew” through his valuable articles, such as the “gold spurs” on his heels (Borroff 159), the “bosses on his belt and other bright gems” (Borroff 160), the “silk bands” around his feet and his saddle (Borroff 164) and the gold-threaded embroidery of “butterflies and birds” in his coat (Borroff 7). These expensive, lavish articles produce the ideas of economic antisemitism that surround Jews. The specificity of his thick Eastern hair and the abundance of his expensive clothes point the Green Knight to be a Jew.

It is significant that the Green Knight is green; the Devil has been depicted to wear green, and Jews have been depicted to work for the Devil. King Arthur and his court are celebrating “Christmastide” (Borroff 37) when a stranger suddenly appears “in guise all of green” (Borroff 151) and as green “as green could be” (Borroff 149). All of the Green Knight’s “vesture verily was verdant green” (Borroff 161) as well as his hair, his beard, his skin, his horse, and his axe. During the Middle Ages, green was associated with fairies and sprites, and therefore, black magic. Additionally, the Devil is often depicted wearing green in Medieval literature; in Chaucer’s *The Friar’s Tale*, for example, the Summoner swears brotherhood to a Yeoman in green clothing who later reveals himself to be a demon. Critical analyst J.A. Burrows also considers the Green Knight to be the Devil in his essay, “Recognition and Confession at The Green Chapel”, due to the authenticity of the knight’s chapel (Burrows 104-105). Due to the medieval construct of portraying the Devil in green, it is likely that the poet chose to represent

the Green Knight - a Jew - in green, for Judaism is as much of a threat to Christianity as Satan. Subsequently, Jews are associated with the Devil (Eisen 2). This link likely originated from the Bible, when Jesus says to a group of Jews, “You are from your father the Devil, and you wish to do the desires of your father” (John 8:44-47). If Jews are a byproduct of the Devil, then Jews would likely be considered an expert in black magic. Consequently, the Green Knight is not only associated with the Devil, but Jews, for he bears the black magical qualities to don himself in “guise of all green” and stand “half a giant on earth” tall, as well as mask his true identity as Lord Bertilak.

There is a Christian fear surrounding circumcision - the Jewish practice of cutting off male foreskin - and similarly, the beheading scene in Part IV has been read as a circumcision. As previously mentioned, Johnson notes that the beheading scene occurs on the Feast of Circumcision in the liturgical calendar. She explains that the Feast of Circumcision “was [originally] considered a sign of the old covenant made between God and Israel”, but that God punished Israel, “for the bargain was inevitably and frequently broken” (Johnson 168). In turn, Medieval Christians claimed circumcision as a sign of justice. Similarly, the Green Knight cut Gawain’s neck with his axe in the vein of justice, for Gawain broke his promise with Lord Bertilak:

“True men pay what they owe
 No danger then in sight,
 You failed at the third throw,
 So take my tap, sir knight.”

(Borroff 2354-2357)

However, the beheading scene in Part IV could be perceived as the Jew stripping the Christian of his morality. Gawain is King Arthur's most chivalrous and "noble" knight (Borroff 405), and Lord Bertilak's court thinks he is as goodly as their "Savior", Jesus Christ (Borroff 922). The fact that Gawain is notably chivalrous is significant, for chivalry was highly influenced by Christianity. For instance, knights must follow the ten commandments of chivalry similarly to how Christians follow the ten commandments in the Holy Bible (Keen 10). As Medievalist Maurice Keen states, knighthood was a way of life to please God. Considering that Gawain is compared to Jesus Christ, it is needless to say that Gawain is a devout Christian. Yet Gawain's good Christian morals are corrupted because of the Jew, the Green Knight. The Green Knight introduces fear into the noble Gawain's mind, and fear possesses him to accept Lady Bertilak's girdle and betray his bargain (Borroff 1861). Similarly, this fear could be read as Gawain's fear of Judaism corrupting his Christianity. In order to save his life, or his Christianity, Gawain lies to Lord Bertilak about receiving the girdle. In doing so, however, he falls deeper into the temptations of the Devilish Jew and breaks the covenant that he made with Lord Bertilak - just how Israel broke its covenant with God. Gawain tries to save his Christianity two more times, for he immediately goes "shamefaced" to confession (Borroff 1880) in the court, and later, he confesses in the false chapel. These confessions are worthless, however, for the covenant has already been broken, and Gawain must reprove his identity with God. For a Jew, identity can be proven through the religious rite of circumcision - but Gawain is not Jewish. Thus, the "beheading scene" is shameful for Gawain on two dimensions; one, the "nick on his neck" (Borroff 2498) marks his betrayal of chivalry, and two, the circumcision does not reform Gawain's relationship with God, for he is at the hands of a Jew in a mythical chapel, where Christianity cannot be saved. Thus, the "nick on [Gawain's] neck" portrays a folly circumcision, where the Jew has stripped the Christian knight of his manhood and his chivalry. Gawain's

“scrape” demonstrates the Christian fear of circumcision, as well as it marks the sin he will carry with him, and the belt around his arm portray the sin he will carry forever. If anything, this scene conveys the medieval anxiety, or fear, of the Jewish threat to the Christian masses, and how Jews will taint the “good” Christians with their wickedness and lead them to sin.

When the Green Knight first challenges Sir Gawain, he says that he stands by “Gog”; “Gog” was an apocalyptic, Jewish entity that Christians feared.

"Sir Gawain," said the Green Knight, "By Gog,
I rejoice that your fist shall fetch this favor I seek"

(Boroff 390-391)

In the Book of Ezekiel within the Hebrew Bible, “Gog” is an individual from the land of “Magog” who will lead an army to attack Israel. The Lord tells Gog that he will go against the “securely dwelled” people who live “upon the mountains of Israel, which [has] been a continual waste” (Ezekiel 38:8). When the Book of Ezekiel was written (around the fifth century), it was thought that Jews were hiding in habitation on a mountaintop because the King of Assyria had exiled them from the nation. According to the Hebrew bible, it is Gog’s Prophecy to lead an attack on Israel, although the Messiah defeats Gog and restores peace to Israel. Whereas Jews interpret “Gog and Magog” to be enemies that prompt the arrival of the Messiah, however, Christians interpret the entities to be allied with Satan that prompt the apocalypse. In the Book of Revelation of the New Testament - a Christian eschatology - Gog is “Satan [who] will be released from his prison” (Revelation 20:7) and he will “deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle” (Revelation 20:8-9). The Revelation also states that heaven, earth, and sea “pass away” by Gog and Magog’s destruction and that the Satanic entities create a new world (Revelation 21:1). In summary, Gog and Magog

are identified as entities that have ties to the Jewish community, for they are ordered by God to attack the “Lost Tribe” of Israel. The Book of Revelation dramatizes their previous role in the Book of Ezekiel, stating that Gog and Magog are not only Satan, but apocalyptic forces that “kill” the Christian heaven, earth, and sea. Therefore, Gog and Magog impose a Jewish threat to Christians by means of invasion. When the Green Knight claims that he stands “by Gog”, he claims that he stands with a Jewish, Satanic, and apocalyptic force. Considering that there is evidence to support that the Green Knight is *both* Satan and a Jew, “Gog” confirms the link between the two entities. In a sense, the Green Knight imposes a threat onto Sir Gawain’s life, but moreover, the Green Knight metaphorically represents the threat of Judaism (which is Satanic) onto Christianity. Like Gog and Magog, the Green Knight will taint Gawain’s chivalric “heaven and earth” by leading him to sin, and expose him to a “new world” that is created from shame. Similarly, the Green Knight’s allegiance to “Gog” demonstrates that medieval fear of Jewish invasion into English and Christian territory. When the poem was written, no Jews lived in England because they had been previously exiled; likewise, no Green Knights or “green men” lived in England, either. Therefore, the Green Knight is the “Jew” that attracts the Satanic “Gog”, who destroys the world that Christians know. Therefore, the presence of “Gog” demonstrates the fear of a Jew suddenly invading the West and prompting the apocalypse that was mentioned in the New Testament.

Considering that Medieval literature was written during a period where Christianity was most the practiced religion in the Western world, it is likely that Anti-Semitic elements underlie Arthurian works to fortify the importance of Christianity. *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight* contains Christian symbols that reinforce Gawain’s chivalric identity, such as his biblical shield and when he is compared to the “Savior”, Jesus Christ. To be a good knight, according to the

poet, is to be Christian; and good, Christian knights - such as Sir Gawain - become terrible, shameful knights in the presence of a pagan. The Green Knight's paganism is demonstrated through his magically green body, circumcision, and allegiance to Gog, which mirrors anti-semitic belief about the Devil and the end of the world. Essentially, Sir Gawain is corrupted by the paganism of the Green Knight in the same way that Christianity is corrupted by the taints of Judaism. The Green Knight represents a Jew, and Gawain represents a Christian; the wealthily dressed and verdantly green "Jew" challenges the noble "Christian" to a game that results in a circumcision that destroys the Christian's chivalric world. The Christian is damned to a life of shame and cowardice because of the Jew's sneaky game, further communicating that the Green Knight is the reason for Gawain's downfall - not women, as Lord Bertilak claims (Boroff 2415). Ultimately, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* provides social commentary on Christianity versus Judaism, of which the Green Knight's appearance, beheading game, and "Gog" link him to Judaism and subsequently, the Devil. Therefore, the poem's portrayal of the Green Knight versus Sir Gawain evokes the Medieval, anti-Semitic belief that Judaism pollutes the purity of Christianity.

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