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Celtic Heritage and Hunting scene in “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight”

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Introduction

1.1 Initial remarks

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is an Arthurian romance contained in a manuscript of the Cottonian Collection, called Nero A. x., preserved in the British Library. It is supposed to have been written around the end of the 14th century and its fate through history is almost entirely unknown, apart from the ownership of Sir Robert Bruce Cotton during the 16th century; the manuscript is mentioned in the “History”¹ of Thomas Warton in 1781, and later on it is published entirely, edited by Frederic Madden, in 1839.

The poem is written in a Northern West Midland dialect, far from the language used by the contemporary Geoffrey Chaucer, and the French-like centres of culture of the South of England. The fact that there is only one manuscript containing the poem suggests that the text did not spread much or that other works have been preferred over it. In addition, the metre used in the poem, the ‘alliterative’ verse,² is quite different from the rhymed and syllable-counting metres from France and Italy, which were much more appreciated at the time; the choice of an old native metre along with the dialect used, all contributed to render the manuscript obscure and detached from the taste of its contemporary.³

According to the studies on the manuscript, there is a general agreement that, while the date of composition of the poem is slightly earlier than its transcription, the subject-matter is certainly far older. The manuscript contains other poems along with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* which are the *Pearl*, *Patience* and *Cleanness*; even though the author is never mentioned in any of these texts, the majority of scholars

¹ A series of volumes that collected together the literary production of Britain, from the Norman arrival in England until the Elizabethan poetry.

² It is a form of verse that uses alliteration to compose the metrical structure, as opposed to other devices such as rhyme. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is metrically composed of stanzas of various lengths, made of alliterative verses that do not rhyme, followed by five short rhymed and alliterative verses, BOITANI 1986, 16.

³ TOLKIEN 2006.

agree that the hand that composed *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is the same at least of the poem *Pearl*.

Pearl is a very personal poem that opens up the manuscript, introduced by four dedicated illustrations, narrating the dream of the poet where he encounters in a beautiful garden – described as the typical heavenly locus amoenus full of flower, grass and water – a maiden dressed with pearls that he recognises as his beloved dead daughter. They discuss about the Christian doctrine and he tries to reach her passing over the stream in the middle of the garden but as soon as he attempts to do it, he wakes up.

1.2 Summary and content of the poem

The poem narrates the story of king Arthur and his knights, gathered for Christmas. Their celebration is interrupted by the arrival of a strange horseman who enters the court, bringing an axe in one hand and a holly-bundle in the other. Beside his peculiar height, the court is impressed by the fact that he is entirely green, hair and skin included; even the horse has the same hue. The man, finely clothed in green and gold, asks Arthur to play a game, a Christmas pastime, offering as a reward his axe. The game consists in delivering a stroke to him with his own axe and then – after a year and a day – accepting one in return. Gawain asks the king to grant him the possibility to participate in the game in his stead, and with his blessing, he strikes the knight in the neck, detaching his head. The head rolls on the ground until it is collected by the knight himself that then dares Gawain to meet him in a year at the Green Chapel and rides away holding his own head in his hand.

After one year, Gawain departs from the court to arrive at the Green Chapel in time for the New Year; he rides in the wild alone until he finds a castle. He seeks hospitality and is gladly welcomed by the lord who proposes him to play a game: the lord is going to hunt the whole day while Gawain stays in the castle to rest, and by the end of the day, they will exchange what they have gained. The first day the lord hunts a deer, while Gawain lingers in bed until he is interrupted by the lady of the castle. They talk

for a while until she doubts he is really Gawain because of his reticence to ask her for a kiss. Gawain grants her desire and they exchange a single kiss, that he later on will give the lord. The second day the prey is a boar, while the lady for the second time goes waking Gawain up and again asks him to kiss her, twice this time. For the second time Gawain and the lord exchange gains of the day. The third day the hunters catches a fox, after a long chasing, and Gawain talks with the lady of the castle for the last time. She asks for something of his as a gift but nothing he has seems enough for her status, so he declines; she then offers him her ring, but again he judges it too highly to be taken by him; her last offer, a green and gold laced girdle is accepted as soon as Gawain knows its ability to protect its possessor from any harm. They kiss three times and depart. During the last exchange of gains, Gawain kisses three times the lord but refrains from giving him the girdle.

On the day agreed for the encounter, Gawain departs from the castle, guided by a servant who, before leaving him to return home, tries to convince him to turn back and not venture inside in the Green Chapel, inhabited by a monstrous man who kills everyone who enters there. Gawain refuses to run away and finally meets the Green Knight, armed with the axe and ready to collect his strike.

The first attempt to strike fails because Gawain shrinks the shoulders, the Green Knight reproves him because of that and once again, Gawain's own identity is doubted because of his behaviour; the second is interrupted by the Green Knight himself, that waits that the other is ready, angering him. The third strike actually wounds the knight, going as far as to draw blood, and Gawain immediately springs away, claiming that the agreement was just of one strike and he is not going to take another.

The Green Knight merrily proclaims that he will receive no harm from him because he paid what was due without fails, except for the girdle. He then confesses to be the lord of the castle with whom Gawain had exchanged goods, and the only fault the knight did was not to return the girdle the lady had gifted him; the whole ordeal has been prepared by the enchantress Morgan, in order to try the proud of the court and scare Guinevere to death. She is the one that changed the lord's appearance and allowed him to resist a beheading. After being informed of the lord's name, Bertilak de Hautdesert, Gawain declines all his invites to come back to his court, to spend time

joyfully and to reconcile with the lady – whose actions were done with the lord's agreement –, he instead angrily rides away, bringing the girdle as a reminder of his fault. The girdle instead is changed in a sign of pride and chivalry by Camelot, and it is stated that every knight will have a similar band from then on.

1.3 Preliminary notes on the poem

The manuscript has been defined as a rare case in its own literary genre, given that the dialect chosen and the type of verse used diverge from the cultural tendency of the England of the time;⁴ for this reason, analysing the poem can give glimpse on a cultural and geographical reality otherwise unknown. It tends also to stand alone in comparison to the other texts on the Arthurian matter, having some of the most known characters in a slightly different role or characterization.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight unmistakably shares similarities with texts from the European tradition – especially French and German – like the Welsh *Mabinogion* or the German *Hunbaut*, imported in Britain by the Normans. Nevertheless, the core of the narration, the symbols used, suggest a deep connection with Anglo-Saxons and the Celtic roots, especially Welsh.

Unfortunately, medieval Welsh written literature offers a very scarce written literature which resulted in a less spreading of the texts, however it is possible to trace similarities and parallelisms by confronting themes and figures present in the most important Welsh texts. The geographic and thematic closeness allows to theorize that the author had a robust knowledge of this culture, along with Latin and French.⁵

Moreover, confronting the text with the most important figures of Celtic folklore, allows to widen the interpretations of the poem, starting from the Green Knight, by far the most emblematic and mysterious one. Many hypotheses have been produced about his function in the text, from the personification of Nature – hence, a Green Man, typical of European tradition – to the reinterpretation of figures of Celtic tradition, the

⁴ BOITANI 1986, 16.

⁵ TOLKIEN 2006, 1.

most plausible one is that he is the result of various figures, mostly Celtic but with glimpse of Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavian ones.

The same theory can be also applied to Gawain who is given in the poem his typical features, present in every version of his, like his connotation of perfect knight or his steed Gringolet, but also peculiar themes, such as the beheading theme or the temptation by the lady. Scholars seem to agree that also in his case he seems to be a Celtic figure with contamination of French elements.

Out of the many studies done upon the subject, J.R.R. Tolkien's work is particularly relevant, especially concerning the general interpretation of the poem itself. Tolkien proposes a moral interpretation, focusing in particular on the hunting scene of the third *fytt* of the poem, by far the longest and most articulated one, along with the seduction scene.

Tolkien recognises the presence of mythological and folkloric matter in the inspiration of the text but concentrates his attention on the themes of the poem, explaining that the mythical origins of the text were not of interest for the public of the 15th century.⁶ According to Tolkien, the core of the poem is the temptation, a scene meticulously built up by the others preceding it, especially because it involves sir Gawain, which he defines as the epitome of the Christian knight. The strong connection between Gawain and religion is testified by many episodes and elements throughout the text, from the most evident one, the pentacle on the shield that represents the five virtues of knighthood, the five joys of Mary and the five wounds of Christ, to dynamics less emphasized as the aid the Virgin Mary provides when Gawain, in the middle of the storm, prays.

The temptation happens during the seduction scene, inserted in the third *fytt* of the poem, and it is a meticulous erosion of the principles of knighthood and courtesy of the knight; Gawain is forced more than once by the lady to choose between behaving as a courteous knight or remaining faithful to the promise he made to the lord of the castle.

⁶ TOLKIEN 2006, 6.

The hunting scene is tightly correlated with the seduction one and it shares with it the third *fytt*; the reason for this, according to Tolkien, is that the hunting scene is supposed to help building up the tension of the seduction scene. The chase that happens every day of hunt increases the rhythm of the seduction, every day more insidious, and it ends every time with the death of the prey. The hunting scene, furthermore, justifies the absence of the lord of the castle, maintaining the realism that characterises the entire text, rather than having the lord mysteriously and conveniently disappearing for a while. For these reasons, the scene has been object of various studies, especially revolving around the folkloric matter that might have inspired it, since the scene, even if it is apparently superfluous, has been defined by Tolkien as essential to the dynamic of the entire poem.

This thesis thus aims to investigate the possible mythological and folkloric matter of the poem, in order to identify, if possible, new interpretative keys for the text itself. The investigation is based on analogous characteristics found in characters and works belonging to cultures and traditions that are geographically and historically adjacent, taking into account the possibility that the author of the poem may have come into contact with them. Most of the connections are found in Celtic culture, particularly Irish but especially Welsh, a branch of the tradition that is often overlooked but presents many commonalities with the work under examination. Finally, given the Arthurian origins, the tradition derived from French culture is also considered.

In the first chapter, the attention is focused on the figures of the Celtic tradition that share some features with the most important characters of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Once established the possible similarities, the relationship between the Celtic character and the concept of hunt is examined as well, in order to evaluate if they can shed more light on the topic. Furthermore, theories on the reasons for choosing the colour green are inspected.

In the second chapter, the hunting scene of the poem is confronted with the folkloric phenomenon typical of 14th century of the Wild Hunt, starting from the hypothesis that some of the themes are shared between the two. The Wild Hunt reaches its peak during the same period of time scholars have indicated for the composition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, therefore the analysis of the Wild Hunt's themes, should the

comparison yield positive results, it can help clarify the interpretative keys to the hunting scene in the poem.

The third chapter focuses on the analysis of the three days of the hunting scene, particularly on the three animals that are hunted. It explores the allegorical meaning of these animals, conveyed through bestiaries typical of the medieval period,⁷ as well as their general symbolic significance, by comparing the various interpretations that scholars have proposed over time. Towards the end of the chapter, an interpretation is proposed that involves not only the knight but also the two rulers of Camelot in the comparison with the three animals.

⁷ In this context the term ‘allegory’ will be adopted in its simplest and broader meaning, as a metaphor connecting characters, events, and elements within a narrative with abstract ideas, moral lessons, or religious truths, as a synonym for Medieval symbolism. For a more in-depth discussion, refer to STRUBEL, 2002.

Chapter one – Celtic characters and themes

1.1 – Initial remarks

Many studies have been done on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in particular the similarities the poem presents in terms of characters and events benefited from much attention. There seems to be a general agreement that the main influences on the poem come from the Celtic tradition, especially the Welsh one, as supported by Loomis in his articles or by Tolkien.

This theory is based on various elements the poem provides, first and foremost the dialect used by the poet, typical of the North-West England, not far from the Welsh borders. Other aspects that encourage this hypothesis are the places in which the events are set, the majority of which are in Wales, like Bertilak's court or the Green Chapel. The realistic geographical setting of the poem not only corroborates the hypothesis that there is a strong connection between *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the Welsh tradition, but it is also used by Lynn Aren as the base of her reinterpretation of the poem as a colonialist metaphor of the civilized England dominating the unruled and barbaric Wales.⁸ Her theory takes into consideration the span of time during which the poem is supposed to have been written, characterised by a bloody conquer by English people of Welsh territories; the fact that Welsh landscapes are described as full of insidious monsters and the land in general is permeated by magic, contraposed to the religious court of Camelot. The Green Knight assumes the role of a hybrid creature, in this theory, half giant half man and this dichotomy is reflected also in his speech, which alternates forbites Gallicisms and words of Anglo-Saxon origin, but this aspect will be discussed better later on.

The poem offers a quite repetitive structure, based on a series of games that are proposed throughout the narration. The most important undoubtedly is the Beheading Game, the one that opens up the narration, but it is actually not the first mentioned in the poem itself; in fact, right before the entrance of the Green Knight in the court, king Arthur is probably about to propose some sort of game to his knights; the reason for

⁸ ARNER 2006.

that is the fact that it is stated how the young king cannot bear to dine without having heard some strange story or having someone “to joyne wyht hym in iustying”.⁹ The other fundamental game is the Exchange of Winning, strictly related to the seduction scene that dominates the third portion of the poem; fundamental for this game is the hunting Bertilak busies himself with, a long and prolific scene as far as the symbolic characteristics are concerned. Before diving into the main aspects of the analysis, the hunt and the corresponding seduction, it is useful to concentrate on the elements that can be proposed as influences for the poem in its integrity, especially concerning the origin of the main characters.

Sir Gawain is one of the most famous knights of the Round Tables, is the main character of many songs and poems, such as *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, a Middle English romance based on the topos of the Loathly Lady, whose only witness is the 16th century miscellaneous MS Rawlinson C.86, conserved in the Bodleian Library of Oxford, or *La Mule sans frein*, a short romance of the late 12th early 13th century, written in Old French and contained in only one manuscript, Bern Burgerbibliothek MS 354. In the poem at hand, sir Gawain maintains his most typical features. He is related to king Arthur, as he himself states at line 357,¹⁰ his personal horse Gringolet is mentioned as well; what characterises him in this story in particular is the symbol of the pentangle, impressed on his shield. The five points of the pentangle represent the five virtues of knighthood, the five wounds of Christ and the five joys of Mother Mary, as the author himself explains.

Fory hit acordez to þis knyzt, and to his cler armez,

For ay faythful in fyue and sere fyue syþez

Gawan watz for gode knawen, and as golde pured,

Voyded of vche vylany, wyth vertuez ennoured

in mote;

[...]

⁹ WESTON 2020, 133 (“To join him in single combat” [my transl.]).

¹⁰ WESTON 2020, 139 “Bot for as much as 3e ar myn em i am only to prayse” (“But I am to be praised only because you are my uncle” [my transl.]).

Fyrst he watz funden fautlez in his fyue wyttez,
 and efte fayled neuer þe freke in his fyue fyngres,
 and alle his afyaunce vpon folde watz in þe fyue woundez
 Þat Cryst kaʒt on þe croys, as þe crede tellez;
 and quere-so-euer þys mon in melly watz stad,
 His þro þoʒt watz in þat, þurʒ alle oþer þyngez,
 Þat alle his forsnes he feng at þe fyue ioiez,
 Þat þe hende heuen-quene had of hir chylde;
 At þis cause þe knyʒt comlyche hade
 In þe inore half of his schelde hir ymage depaynted,
 Þat quen he blusched þerto, his belde neuer payred.
 Þe fyrst fyue þat I finde þat þe frek vsed,
 Watʒ fraunchyse, and felazschyp forbe al þyng;
 His clannes & his cortaysye croked were neuer,
 and pité, þat passez alle poyntez, þyse pure fyue
 Were harder happed on þat hapel þen on any oþer.
 Now alle þese fyue sybez, for soþe, were fetled on þis knyʒt,
 and vchone halched in oþer, þat non ende hade,
 and fyched vpon fyue poyntez, þat fayld neuer,
 Ne samned neuer in no syde, ne sundred nouþer¹¹

¹¹ WESTON 2020, 145-6 (“For it suited this knight, and his bright arms,/ For ever faithful in five and in five ways,/Gawain was known as good, and pure as gold,/ deprived of every villainy, adorned with virtues in the court [...]First, he was found faultless in his five senses,/and never once failed in his five fingers,/ and all his trust on earth was in the five wounds/that Christ received on the cross, as the Creed tells;/ and wherever this man was placed in combat,/ his firm thought was on that, through all other things, /that all his fortitude he gained from the five joys/ that the gracious queen of heaven had of her child;/ For this reason the knight had in the inner half of his shield her image depicted,/ so that when he looked at it, his courage never diminished./ The first five that I find that the knight used/ were generosity and fellowship above all things;/ his purity and courtesy never crooked,/ and pity, which surpasses all qualities, these pure five were more firmly set upon that man than upon any other./ Now all these five

In the poem it signifies perfection “in piety and morality, and the ‘courtesy’ that flows therefrom into human relations”.¹²

Even if it is barely mentioned, its presence in the late part of the text, or rather its absence, bears a strong symbolic value for the knight that is closely connected to the last part of the hunting scene.

The character that dominates symbolically the poem and provides its title is the Green Knight, an enigmatic and puzzling figure, taller than a man and coloured in a green hue, armed with an axe but bearing at the same time a holly as symbol of peace. By the end of the poem, it is revealed how the lord that hosted Gawain, Bertilak, was the Green Knight all along, altered in the appearance via the usage of magic. This double nature is the starting point from which to connect this figure to a number of other that might share some similarities, with particular regard to the connection with the concept of hunt. The firsts taken into consideration belong to the Celtic literature, both Irish and Welsh ones, given that present a number of characteristics in common, especially concerning magic aspects of the story. The ability of the Green Knight to shapeshift resembles the magical capabilities of Cúroí, the most prominent magician of the Irish tradition. The physical characteristics of the Green Knight, on the other hand, show similarities with the ones of Bran the Blessed, a legendary king of Wales known for his huge stature and magical abilities. Studies have also traced resemblances between Bran the Blessed and the Fisher King, one of the recurring characters of the Quest for the Graal, and the Fisher King himself is of importance, given that he seems to share some characteristics with Bertilak, the human side of the Green Knight shown in the poem. Lastly, the figure that is the most connected of all to the concept of hunt and that depicts similarities with both the Green Knight and Bertilak is the Welsh king of the Otherworld Arawn. Not only the poems in which Arawn is protagonist present similar themes to those depicted in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* but the figure of the king himself seems to offer particular insights regarding the possible symbolic

qualities, truly, were fixed on this knight,/ and each intertwined with the others, so that none had an end,/ and fixed upon five points, that never failed,/ nor separated on any side, nor parted either” [my transl. based on TOLKIEN 2006]).

¹² TOLKIEN 2006, 77.

meaning of the hunt. The firsts characters to be analysed are those who share more resemblances with the magic themes present in the poem.

1.2 – Cùroi

Cùroi is a character from the Irish Celtic tradition and he is present in a large number of stories, most of the times as an ally and friend of the hero Cú Chulainn but also as his enemy. He is a magician with the capability of shapeshifting and he makes abundant use of this skill thorough the stories. The most famous one, and also the closest to the structure of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is the *Fled Bricrenn* (in gaelic, “Bricriu’s Feast”).

The story revolves around the competition between three heroes – namely Cú Chulainn, Conall Cernach and Lóegaire Búadach – in order to decide who among them deserves the “champion’s portion” of Bricriu’s house.¹³ Cùroi appears in the story with two different disguises: the first one is of a churl, armed with an axe, who asks the heroes to behead him and be beheaded in exchange. He’s described as

A m-bói and in gilla, co n-acca in scáilfer mór ina dochum.
Nir bo segunda a tuarascbáil: se mullachlethan belremur
bolcsuilech, grendetenach granna grucánach, dosmailgech
docraid adetig, sé tailc talchar tinsensach, sé sotal sucach
séitfidach, sé rengmar rigtrén rochalma, sé borb brogda
bachlachda. Mældub demsidi fair, arit odor immi, inar co foph
a thona im sodain, senbrisca asalcha má chossa. Mátan
maglorci móri fria ais amal mol mulind.¹⁴

¹³ “Mad lett ém cater athmir mo thige-se, bid lat cater athmir Emna do grés. Is cóir curathmir mo thige do cosnom” (“Sooth, if the champion’s portion of my house be thine, the championship of Emain is thine for ever. The champion’s portion of my house is portion worth contesting, for it is not the portion of a fool’s house”) HANDERSON 1899, 8-9.

¹⁴ (“Not beautiful his appearance: broad (of shoulder) and fat of mouth; with sack eyes and a bristly face; ugly, wrinkled, with bushy eyebrows; hideous and horrible and strong; stubborn, violent and haughty; fat and puffing; with big sinews and strong forearm, bold and audacious and uncouth. A shorn black patch of hair on him, a dun covering about him, a tunic over it to the ball of his rump; on his feet old tattered brogues, on his back a ponderous club like unto the wheel-shaft of a mill.”) HANDERSON 1899. 44/46-7.

Some details return in the description of the Green Knight, namely his broad shoulders and his strength but the major change in those two characters is the general impact they make: Cùroi is a churl, is ugly and wears tattered and poor clothes, whereas the Green Knight is finely dressed. He is clad in rich clothing such as a robe with fur finely trimmed, has bright stones set on the belt and his horse is combed and cured as well. The author himself states that “all his features folzande, in forme þat he hade, ful clene”,¹⁵ what surprises of his appearance is the colour, not the clothing.

Even if the description of the Green Knight depicts him as an aristocrat, there is an echo of this churlish nature in the way he speaks, and the language used by the author to describe him. As pointed out by Maria Volkonskaya in her article *Loanwords and stylistics: on the Gallicisms in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the Green Knight is presented as “both as a handsome courtier, dressed in line with the latest fashion, and a monster, a bearded churl” and this is done by an alternation of French loanwords and English words, sometimes with Scandinavian origin. His way of speaking also reflects this dichotomy because he uses a language “brusque, simple and a bit churlish, with almost no French loanwords at all”¹⁶ when he’s the Green Knight but as soon as he reveals to be sir Bertilak, he uses the same courtly language of the others.

Another element that Cùroi and the Green Knight shares can be found later on in the *Fled Bricreann*, when Cùroi disguised is about to behead Cú Chulainn. In the text it can be read that

Tic iarom arabarach dia saichtin agus nonsinethar Cuculainn
dó forsin licc. Tairnid fo thri in m-bial for a munel agus a cùl
rempi.¹⁷

Both Cùroi and the Green Knight pretend to behead the hero for three times, before declaring he has passed the challenge he was being subjected to.

¹⁵ WESTON 2020, 134.

¹⁶ VOLKONSKAYA 2013, 152.

¹⁷ (“On the morrow he comes back on his quest, Cuchulainn stretches himself out for him on the stone. The axe with its edge reversed he draws down thrice on Cuchulainn's neck”) HANDERSON 1899, 98-99/101.

Cùroi reappears disguised as a giant in the 15th chapter of the *Fled Bricrenn*, when the three heroes go to Cùroi's fortress.¹⁸ This portion of the story shares many similarities with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, such as the fact that Cùroi, like Bertilak, is far from home and will not return before three days, and the behaviour adopted by the lady of the castle in his absence. The three heroes are asked to guard the castle while waiting for Cùroi's return and during the night, the shapeshifter appears as a giant, described as

Robói isin t-suidiu faire iar sudiu co dered na haidche, connaca
in scath chuci aniar rodarc a sula co fota dond farrci. Ba dímór
ocus ba grainni oocus ba úathmar laiss in scáith, ar indar laiss
rosiacht corrici ethiar a arddi, oocus bá fodeirc dó folés na
farrci fo a gabul. Is amlaid tanic a dochum oocus lán a da glac
lais do lommanaib darach, oocus robói eire cuinge sesrige in
cech lomchrund dib, agus nir aitherracht béim do bun chraind
dib acht óen béim co claidiub.

([As he kept watch into the later part of the night,] he saw a
giant (Scath) approaching him far as his eyes could see from
the sea westwards. Exceeding huge and ugly and horrible he
thought him, for in height, it seemed to him, he reached unto
the sky, and the sheen (broad expanse) of the sea was visible
between his legs. Thus did he come, his hands full of stripped
oaks, each of which would form a burden for a waggon-team
of six, at whose root not a stroke had been repeated after the
single sword-stroke.)¹⁹

¹⁸ In the chapter is also stated that “In what airt soever of the globe Curoi should happen to be, every night o’er the fort he chaunted a spell, till the fort revolved as swiftly as a mill-stone. The entrance was never to be found after sunset.” (HANDERSON 1899, 103). The rotating castle can be found also in *La Mule sans frein*, a short French Arthurian romance of the early 13th century whose plot is very close to the one of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The most relevant elements are the fact that Gawain is asked to retrieve the bridles for a young woman from a rotating castle; once he succeeds in entering, a churl approaches him and proposes him a Beheading game, where the knight first and the churl after beheads the opponent. Once it is Gawain's turn to be hit, though, the churl releases him without harming him. The knight then fights various opponents before succeeding in retrieving the bridles and returning to the court. (KIBLER 2014).

¹⁹ HANDERSON 1899, 102-3.

Cùroi does not wield an axe this time but uses as weapon directly the trees, nonetheless, the concept of a physically huge and imponent giant that threatens the heroes returns, even if on a much bigger scale.

In this chapter it is also introduced the figure of Blàthnat, Cùroi's wife. She is the one that welcomes the three men in his husband's stead. Like lady Bertilak, she seems informed of her husband's plotting, given that it is said that

rofitir co ticfaitis, ocus foracaib comarle lasin mnái im réir na
curad, co tísad don turus, dia n-dechaid sair hi tirib
Scithiach.²⁰

She returns in other typical Irish stories, especially those that revolve around the matter of love-triangle and kidnapping. These stories present variations on this archetypal theme, where two heroes – in this case Cùroi and Cú Chulainn – share the spoils of victory that include a woman, – here Blàthnat –. Both want to have her, one of them – Cùroi – succeeds in taking her home but after a year is confronted by the other – Cú Chulainn – and defeated. Of all the stories, the one that seems to share more similarities with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is *The violent death of Cùroi*, where the magician is defeated and killed after the betrayal of his loved Blàthnat. The striking similarity with the 14th century poem comes from the presence of a magic girdle. It is indeed specified how the spoils of the battle include not only Blàthnat herself but also a girdle that prevents any harm to the person who wears it,²¹ the same way the green girdle that lady Bertilak offers Gawain does.

Other Arthurian stories are connected to *The violent death of Cùroi* and more generally, to the Celtic tradition of a magic girdle, as shown by Sherman Loomis in his article *More Celtic Elements in "Gawain and the Green Knight"*. The first poem mentioned is the *Diu Krone*, written in Middle High German around the 1220s by the epic poet Heinrich von dem Türlin. In the episode narrated from l. 3205 to l. 5468, called *Gasozein de Dragoz*, the knight Gasozein enters the court of king Arthur and claims he is the lover of the queen, and in order to prove the truth of his

²⁰ ("Knowing they would come, he counselled his wife regarding the heroes until he should return from his oriental expedition into Scythian territory") HANDERSON 1899, 100-1.

²¹ SHERMAN LOOMIS 1943.

words asks to give her a girdle that supposedly only he, Guinevere and Gawain know about. Magic powers are attributed to the girdle, interwoven by two fairies.

Mit ir selben dâ ze stete.
Ditz tuet aber durch mîn bete
Und bringt ir disen riemen,
Den bekennet dâ niemen
Wan sie und Gâwein und ich,
Und bittet sie, daz sie mich
Durch mîn liebe gespreche vruo
Und daz an dirre stat tuo.
Als sie den gürtel ersiht,
Sô weiz sie wol, daz ir niht
Unreht saget dar an.
Gâwein ir den gürtel gwan
Unde gap sie in mir,
Dô ich nu næhest schiet von ir.
Der gürtel hât sô grôz kraft,
Swer in treit der ist sô werhaft,
Daz in niemen kan gewinnen;
Dar zuo muoz in minnen
Beidiu man unde wîp;
Sîn tugent unde sîn lîp
Wirt dâ von gerîchet;
Fortûna den beswîchet
Dêswâr niemer, der in hât;

Ime volget aller Sælden rât
An aller werlde sache;
Er slâfe oder wache,
Sô versorget in daz Heil,
Daz der Sælden gundes teil
Einem man nie mêt geviel.
Ein rîchiu fei Giranphiel
Und ir swester worhten in
Alsô nach dirre Sælden gwin
Ir vriunde Finbeus von Karlin.²²

The second Arthurian text involving a magic girdle is *Wigalois*, another High German poem of the early 13th century, written by Wirnt von Grafenberg. The story is named after the son of sir Gawain, Wigalois, but the character appears only in the second half of the narration; the first part is dedicated to the arrival at king Arthur's court of a strange knight who offers queen Guinevere a girdle that bestows great knowledge to its possessor. Once the queen refuses the gift, the knight challenges the knights of the Round Table and ends up taking Gawain as prisoner, bringing him to his court where he meets Florie, the future mother of Wigalois himself.²³

Als er die küniginne sach,
vil gezogenlîche er dô sprach
'ûf gnâde bin ich komen her;
nu gewert mich, vrouwe, des ich ger,

²² SCHOLL 1852, 60. ("Take her this belt, which is known only to her, Gawain, and me, and ask her to come soon and speak with me here for my love's sake. When she sees the belt, she will know that your report is true. Gawain won it for her and she gave it to me when I last parted from her. The belt has such power that the wearer is adored by both men and women and cannot be defeated in battle, for his virtues and strength are greatly increased. Fortuna never fails him but watches over him day and night and aids him in all he does; no one ever enjoys her favor more than he. A mighty fairy called Giramphiel, helped by her sister, made it to bring good luck to her lover, Fimbeus of Sardin." THOMAS 1989, 55).

²³ THOMAS, 1977, 23.

durch wîplîche güete:
sô ist mîn gemüete
geprîset immer mêre;
nu enpfâhet durch iuwer êre
mîn bet genædicliche,
daz iuch diu Sælde rîche.’
‘nu sprechet, rîter, wes ir gert.’
‘vrouwe, daz ich werde gewert.’
‘nû saget mir doch: wes?’
‘vrouwè, niwan des:
daz ir von mir geruochet nemen
einen gürtel, der wol möhte gezemen
al der werlte vrouwen;
den lâz ich iuch schouwen.
behaltet in unz morgen vruo.
trage iuch iuwer muot dar zuo,
sô habet iu’n zeigen von mir;
sî ab, vrouwe, daz ir
den gürtel niht behalten welt,
sô wil ich in als ein helt
morgen holen hie durch strît
ze rehter âventiure zît;
od ich bin der hie tôt gelît.’²⁴

²⁴ KAPTEYN 1926, 14-5 (“When he saw the queen, he spoke very courteously, “I have come here in hope of your favor. Now grant me, lady, in womanly kindness what I desire and my spirit will be exalted evermore. For your honor's sake, receive my request charitably, that Fortune may reward you.” “Well,

In both these stories Guinevere is the character involved with the girdle, either as a giver or a receiver, something that is missing in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, where in a way, the queen assumes the role of a helpless prey. She is the addressee of Morgan's hatred, and the entire plot seems to revolve around the sorceress' desire to scare the queen to death as the Green Knight himself declares.²⁵ The female character that holds the majority of agency is undoubtedly lady Bertilak, a figure almost as enigmatic as her husband and seemingly sharing some of Blàthnat's characteristics. The most evident common feature is the fact that she is an accomplice of her husband and also that she owns the magic girdle that she offers Gawain.

By comparing the dominant elements of *The violent death of Cùroi* and the later literary tradition, especially *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, it seems like Blàthnat's characteristics evolved in various figures, according to their role in the stories. Queen Guinevere in particular, inherited her aspect of disputed and kidnapped woman, along with her high social status, while the magic aspects Blàthnat is involved with converged in the figure of Morgan, the one in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* whose actions determine the entirety of the plot.

Morgan is present as well in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; like Cùroi, her first appearance is in disguise and only by the end of the story the Green Knight reveals to Gawain that the old lady that follows lady Bertilak is actually her. Her description in the second *fytt* poses her as diametrically opposed to the beautiful lady Bertilak; the young lady is fair skinned and richly clothed, she has "rough wrinkled cheeks", is "clad with a cloth that enclosed all her neck", her nose, her eyes and lips are all "horribly bleared".²⁶ This emphasis on the contrast of youth and beauty and oldness might be an echo of the Celtic tradition of Cailleach and Brigid.

speak, knight, what do you want?" "Lady, just that grant my request." "Then tell me, what is it?" "Lady, only that I deign to accept from me a belt which indeed would become any lady in the world. I'll let you look at it. Keep it till tomorrow morning and, if your fancy so inclines, you shall have it as a gift from me. However, my lady, if you do not want to keep the belt, then I shall reclaim it at the proper time tomorrow as a warrior in combat, or shall die here" THOMAS, 1977).

²⁵ As the Green Knight states, the aim was to "haf greued Gaynour and gart hir to dy3e" WESTON 2020, 187 ("In hope Guinevere to hurt, that she in horror might die" TOLKIEN 2006, 90).

²⁶ TOLKIEN 2006, 45.

The Cailleach is a character of the folklore, sometimes interpreted as a goddess, sometimes as a personification of nature, and belongs to the Celtic tradition, especially the Irish and Scottish one. Donald Alexander Mackenzie in his *Wonder Tales from Scottish Myth and Legend* provides a description of this lady – called Beira, Queen of Winter in the Scottish tradition – stating that she is an old lady during winter time, then in spring she drinks from a magic fountain and gains back her youth – becoming the goddess of fertility Brigid – and then ages again. In her aged appearance, she has “only one eye, but the sight of it was keen and sharp as ice [...]. Her complexion was a dull, dark blue [...] All her clothing was grey²⁷”.²⁸ Morgan’s appearance does not match entirely the description of the Beira, for instance they do not share the characterizing missing eye, but there are other elements that connect these two figures, especially the temporal aspect, both appears during winter time, the contraposition with a fair young lady and the divine echoes. The Beira is called “Quenn of Winter” and her younger self is a goddess in Mackenzie’s work, while Morgan in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is defined by the Green Knight as a *goddess*.²⁹

While the connection between Cú Roí and the Green Knight is easy to establish, the same cannot be said for the female figure closest to him, Bláthnat. The character seems indeed to be split between the various women present in the poem, all of which share specific attributes with her. Her complicity in her husband’s plans is represented by the character of Lady Bertilak, her magic abilities can be found in Morgan, and she shares with Guinevere the link with the girdle and the nature of disputed woman. Even without considering these female characters as derived directly from Bláthnat, their similarities strengthen the theory that the poem is inspired by Celtic tradition.

Out of the two aspects of the Green Knight, either his supernatural figure or his human appearance of sir Bertilak, Cúroi shares many similarities with the first one. The most relevant parallels are the ability of shapeshifting and the ownership of magic objects; both figures change appearance in their stories, mostly for testing

²⁷ Her appearance of a one-eyed old woman, clad in grey connects her also with the Norse god Odin.

²⁸ MACKENZIE 1917, 25.

²⁹ WESTON 2020, 187.

the hero's abilities, and the presence of the magic girdle is connected in both cases to a female figure married to them. It is also possible to trace a physical resemblance between Cùroi and the Green Knight, given that they are both described as giants: the term used for Cùroi is *scáth*, used also for indicating a shadow or a spectre,³⁰ the Green Knight on the other hand is referred to as an *etayn*, defined as a supernatural being of great size and strength, a giant.³¹

1.3 – Celtic word for colour

A dominant characteristic of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is the colour of the Green Knight himself, defined in the text with the term *grene*. The choice for this colour is never explained by the poet and its only purpose seems to be to impress the court of Camelot, given that the entrance of the Green Knight is followed by a general sense of surprise, “for vch mon had meruayle quat hit mene myzt/ Þat a haþel and a horse myzt such a hwe lach”.³² Scholars have long studied possible explanations for this colour but there seems not to be a univocal answer: one of the theories is that the Green Knight is connected to the figure of the Green Man.³³ Along with the similar sounding name, also the physical place the Knight lives in, the Green Chapel, connects him with nature. Not just nature, but a wild variant of it, given that the Green Chapel presents itself to Gawain, at ll. 2172 and 2181, as “balȝ berȝ bi a bonke þe brymme bysyde/ [...] and ouergrowen with gresse in glodes anywhere”.³⁴ Gawain's reaction to this vision also suggests this interpretation, because his first thought is that the place

³⁰ “scáth” in WordSense Dictionary <https://www.wordsense.eu/sc%C3%A1th/>.

³¹ “etayn” in Middle English Compendium <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED14577/track?counter=1>.

³² WESTON 2020, 134. (“for everyone had marvelled what it might mean/that a man and a horse might have such a hue” [my transl.]).

³³ The latest film adaptation of the poem, *The Green Knight*, directed by David Lowery (2021; United States: A24), opted for this interpretation of the Green Knight which is depicted in fact as a man made of foliage.

³⁴ WESTON 2020, 181. (“a worn barrow on a brae by the brink of a water/and with grass in green patches was grown all over” TOLKIEN 2006, 81).

he is about to enter in is evil and it explains “wel bisemez þe wyȝe wruxled in grene/dele here his deuocioun on þe deuelez wyse”.³⁵

The term Green Man is used for referring both to a decorative element present in many cathedrals in middle and north Europe which represent a male head made of leaves or with vines coming out his mouth, ears, or nose and to a folklore figure of a man covered in leaves, usually carrying a club, similar to the Wild Man. The overlap is supposed to have happened in 1939³⁶ when Lady Raglan in her article *The “Green Man” in Church Architecture* theorized that the architectural figures were “the figure variously known as the Green Man, Jack-in-the-Green, Robin Hood, the King of May, and the Garland, who is the central figure in the May-day celebrations throughout Northern and Central Europe”.³⁷ The meaning this correlation proposes is the one summed up by Araneo as “In the pagan tradition, Green Man imagery most likely represented fertility, rebirth, renewal and rites of spring and procreation.”.³⁸ Anyway, the connection theorized by Lady Raglan is not supported by ancient texts, and therefore cannot be considered reliable for interpreting them, as there is no evidence that such a connection was made in antiquity.

The identification of the Green Knight with the Green Man is still considered controversial, as shown by Gentile in his article *Shape-Shifter in the Green: Performing Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, mostly because scholars do not agree on identifying a connection between the Green Knight and a rebirth theme, inescapable in the case of the Green Man. There is also a branch of theories that concentrate on the shift the colour green had during medieval time, from a knightly and spring colour to an evil connotation,³⁹ Lynn Arner goes along with this hypothesis, claiming that the natural attributes of the Green Knight are to be interpreted as references to his barbaric nature, explained by the fact that he belongs to the magic and pagan land of Wales, more than references to the Green Man.⁴⁰

³⁵ WESTON 2020, 181 (“It fit well [that] the man became green/to share his devotion in the Devil’s way” [my transl.]).

³⁶ ARANEO 2007, 2.

³⁷ LADY RAGLAN 1939, 50.

³⁸ ARANEO 2007, 8.

³⁹ GENTILE 2014, 230.

⁴⁰ ARNER 2006, 88.

Given that the green colour does not immediately reconnects the Green Knight to a specific figure, either from folklore or literature, it is interesting to analyse the term used for the colour itself. Many languages throughout the globe display a colexification of the colours blue and green, sometimes with the addition of grey, all of them being expressed by the same term.

The general agreement on the term *grene*, used throughout the text for referring to the Green Knight, is that it “can denote every shade of the concept and can be attributed to several fields of objects”⁴¹ and it is “a colour intermediate between blue and yellow in the spectrum”,⁴² its meaning tends to be specified through the addition of other terms such as *enker-* or *hǣwengrēne*. The ambiguity of the distinction is more evident with the terms related to the colour blue, with names such as *hǣwen*, ‘blue, livid’ which probably originally covered the spectrum from pale grey to pale green but, once the terms *grene* and *græg* rose in Middle English, it narrowed its meaning to pale blue.⁴³ Another example of a term that includes both the blue and grey hue is OE *hǣwē*, ME *haue*, *hawe*, ‘blue, gray’.

A similar situation can be found for the Gaelic term *glas*, translated as grey, green, pale.⁴⁴ Macbain in his *An etymological dictionary of the Gaelic language* postulates the theory that the Ger. *glass*, Eng. ‘glass’, are probably allied to the root of the term, *glas*.⁴⁵

The overlapping meaning of the three colours, green blue and grey, opens up the possibility that the Green Knight was related not to green figures such as the Green Man but to grey-clad ones and the colour shifted through times to a green hue. There are two figures belonging to the Celtic tradition that share a resemblance with the Green Knight and are described as clad in grey.

⁴¹ MATSCHI 2004, 83.

⁴² “green” in Oxford English Dictionary
https://www.oed.com/dictionary/green_adj?tab=meaning_and_use#2423598.

⁴³ MATSCHI 2004, 89 and LOTUT 2022, 31.

⁴⁴ MACBAIN 1911, 196 and Old Irish Online
https://lrc.la.utexas.edu/eieol_base_form_dictionary/iriol/17.

⁴⁵ From the OE *glæs* ‘glass’ ‘made of glass’ is supposed to be derived the term *glæsen* ‘shiny pale blue’ (MATSCHI 2004, 91). Biggam affirms that the term *glæsen* in OE was used for referring to grey-green or grey-blue hue (BIGGAM 1997, 110).

The first is Cùroi, described in *The violent death of Cùroi* as a figure clad in grey.

Luid didu Cūrūi mac Dāiri leosom don forbais 7
nīnaitgēntair .i. fer broit lachtna asbertadar fris. Cach cend
doberthea asin dūn, “Cia romarb in fer sin?” ar Conchobar.
“Misi 7 fear in broit lachtna,” ar cach fear ar n-ūair.⁴⁶

The second is Arawn, one of the kings of the Otherworld, met by Pwyll during a hunt, during which they contend with each other a stag.

Ac ar hynny att y kwn y doeth ef. agyrru yr erchwys aladyssei
y carw ymeith. allithyaw y erchwys ehunan ar y carw. ac ual
y byd ynllithyaw y cwn. ef awelei varchawc yn dyuot yn ol yr
erchwys y ar varch erchlas mawr a chorn canu am y vynwgyl.
Agwisc o vrethyn llwyttei ymdanaw yn wisg hela. ar hynny y
march awc adoeth attaw ef. adywedut ual hyn wrthaw.⁴⁷

The similarities shared by those figures suggest the possibility that there was a common base upon which all of them were on, originally characterised by the colour grey that later on evolved in the colour green, or that the Gawain-poet took inspiration from them but changed the colour.

The reasons for such a choice are difficult to hypothesize, except perhaps for the greater visual impact of green compared to grey, as green is much more unnatural. Another plausible hypothesis is that the colour green is traditionally associated with fairies, or supernatural creatures in general, and consequently, the choice of this colour was made to immediately signify the supernatural nature of the knight.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ (“Cùròi son of Dàre went with them then to the siege, and they did not recognize him, that is, they called him the man in a grey mantle. Every head that was brought out of the fort, “who slew that man?” said Conchobar. “I and the man in the grey mantle,” each answered in turn.) BEST 1905, 20-21.

⁴⁷ (“And he came towards the dogs, and drove away those that had brought down the stag, and set his own dogs upon it, And as he was setting on his dogs, he saw a horseman coming towards him upon a large light grey steed, with a hunting horn about his neck, and clad in garments of grey woollen in the fashion of a hunting garb. And the horseman drew near and spoke unto him thus.”) GUEST 1849, 8/38-9.

⁴⁸ HUTCHINGS 1977, 58.

1.4 – Bran the Blessed and the Fisher King

Delving into the Celtic tradition of Wales, we face a mythological figure that revolves around similar elements of the Green Knight: Bran the Blessed, one of the most important and known characters of the Welsh tradition. He participates in many stories, the most important ones being collected in the *Mabinogion*, where the second branch is particularly relevant here, called *Branwen ferch Llŷr*, “Branwen, daughter of Llŷr”.

The *Mabinogion* is a collection of prose stories from the oral tradition, whose main witnesses are two manuscripts, the White Book of Rydderch (Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, MS Peniarth 4-5), dated around 1350, and the Red Book of Hergest (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Jesus College 111), dated between 1382 and c. 1410.⁴⁹ The origin of name *Mabinogion* is still uncertain, the most accredited theory is the one summed up by Davies in the introduction of his translation of *The Mabinogion*, that goes as follows: “the term is a scribal error for *mabinogi*, derived from the Welsh word *mab* meaning ‘son, boy’. As a result, some have suggested that *mabinogi* was a tale for boys, or perhaps a tale told by young or apprentice storytellers”. The first four tales of the collection are also known as “The Four Branches of the Mabinogion” and each is after one character of the Welsh medieval literary tradition. The second is dedicated to Branwen, the sister of Bran.

The tale revolves around the dispute between Bran, king of Britain and the Irish king Matholwch. The latter asks to marry Bran’s sister Branwen; however during the celebrations, the third brother Efnissyen, defined as a troublemaker, mutilates out of spite the Irish horses, angering Matholwch and bringing the two nations on the brink of war. In order to make peace, Bran gifts the king a magic cauldron that possesses the capability of reviving the dead.⁵⁰ The marriage takes place but after two years, the Irish man seeks revenge for the treatment received in Wales and confine Branwen in the kitchen, ill treating her. The woman asks her brother for help and the British promptly

⁴⁹ DAVIES 2007, x.

⁵⁰A similar object is also mentioned in the Dictionary of Celtic mythology: “Arawn owned a magic cauldron (*Preiddiau Annwfn*, the Spoils of Annwfn), one of the treasures of Britain, which Arthur coveted.” MACKILLOP 1998, 19.

invade Ireland to rescue her. In the war that follows, Matholwch uses the magic cauldron to revive his men, until Efnissyen sacrifices himself and destroys it; Bran is fatally wounded by a spear and Branwen, upon seeing so much despair, dies of broken heart. Before dying, Bran commands his men to behead him and bury his head in the Gwynfryn, the “White Hill”, facing France in a protecting way.⁵¹ In the span of time between the beheading of Bran and his burial, the head keeps talking to his men, entertaining them.

Bran is an enormous man, even if he is hardly ever described directly. Throughout the text there are mentions about his dimensions, like for instance the fact that the welcoming feast is attended in “tents not a house, for no house could hold the Great Bran the Blest”,⁵² or when he and his men are reaching Ireland. Due to the shallowness of the water, Bran is forced to walk, and some Irish swineherds spot him and report to the king.

Gwelem arglwyd heb wy mynyd mawr geir llaw y coet.

ahwnnw argerdet. Ac esgeir aruchel ar y mynyd.

A llyn o pob parth or esgeir.

⁵¹ The act of putting a head on the ground facing someone can be found also in the Norse tradition: the *niðstong*. It was used for cursing someone, as shown in the *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*: “Ok er þeir Egill kómu til Herðlu þá runnu þeir þegar upp til bæjar með alvæpni. En er þat sá Þórir ok hans heimamenn þá runnu þeir þegar af bænum ok forðuðu sér allir þeir er ganga máttu, karlar ok konur. Þeir Egill ræntu þar qllu fé því er þeir máttu hǫndum á koma; fóru síðan út til skips. Var þá ok eigi langt at biða at byrr rann á af landi. Búask þeir til at sigla, ok er þeir váru seglbúnir gekk Egill upp í eyrna. Hann tók í hǫnd sér heslistǫng ok gekk á bergsnos nokkura þá er vissi til lands inn; þá tók hann hrosshǫfuð ok setti upp á stǫngina. Síðan veitti hann formála ok mælti svá: ‘Hér set ek upp niðstǫng ok sný ek þessu niði á hǫnd Eiríki konungi ok Gunnhildi dróttningu’—hann sneri hrosshǫfðinu inn á land—‘sný ek þessu niði á landvættir þær er land þetta byggja svá at allar fari þær villar vega, engi hendi né hitti sitt inni fyrr en þær reka Eirík konung ok Gunnhildi ór landi.’ Síðan skýtr hann stǫnginni niðr í bjargrifu ok lét þar standa. Hann sneri ok hǫfðinu inn á land, en hann reist rúnar á stǫnginni ok segja þær formála þenna allan.” Síðan skýtr hann stǫnginni niðr í bjargrifu ok lét þar standa. Hann sneri ok hǫfðinu inn á land, en hann reist rúnar á stǫngina, ok segja þær formála þenna allan.” EINARSSON 2003, 98 (“And when all was ready for sailing, Egil went up into the island. He took in his hand a hazel-pole, and went to a rocky eminence that looked inward to the mainland. Then he took a horse’s head and fixed it on the pole. After that, in solemn form of curse, he thus spake: ‘Here set I up a curse-pole, and this curse I turn on king Eric and queen Gunnhilda. (Here he turned the horse’s head landwards.) This curse I turn also on the guardian-spirits who dwell in this land, that they may all wander astray, nor reach or find their home till they have driven out of the land king Eric and Gunnhilda.’ This spoken, he planted the pole down in a rift of the rock, and let it stand there. The horse’s head he turned inwards to the mainland; but on the pole he cut runes, expressing the whole form of curse.” GREEN 1983, 121-122) The difference is that the aim of the *niðstong* was to prevent benevolent spirits from reaching the person cursed, in Bran’s case, his head is a protection against the enemies.

⁵² JONES 2019, 33.

Ar coet ar mynyd aphoppeth o hynny oll ar gerdet.

Ie heb ynteu nyt oes neb yma awypi odiywrth hynny o nys
gwyr brañwen gouyn awnaeth y kennadeu aaeth att uranwen.

Arglwydes heb wy beth debygy di yw hynny.⁵³

They ask Branwen what it could be, and she answers that it's her brother who is coming, the lakes they saw are in fact his eyes. Later on, when the army arrives to a bridge that has been cut down in order to stop them, Bran lies on the ground and becomes the bridge himself.

The peculiarity of Bran is that it is never explained the reason he is so tall but this characteristic does not detach him from the other people. He does not belong to the inhumanly creatures such as Grendel, which is called a *þyrse* (giant)⁵⁴ among his many derogative attributes, nor his height is used to emphasize his difference from the others like in the Green Knight case, whose description is “half etayn in erde I hope þat he were”.⁵⁵

An even more peculiar element of contact between Bran and the Green Knight, apart from the height, is the severed head that keeps talking. Only in the version of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the Knight takes his head and, without putting it back on, it keeps talking, just like Bran's head does entertaining his men for 80 years; in all the other versions dealing with a matter similar to that of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the Knight puts the head back in place and only then moves away. In the *Hunbaut*, for instance, Gawain in order to kill the opponent must seek the detached head and stop it from reaching the body.

Unlike the *Fled Bricrenn* where the beheading is only attempted but does not happen, in Bran's story his head is indeed separated from the body but keeps talking. It is not specified how the head can still be alive, but Bran's directions on where to bury it and

⁵³ (“A wood have we seen upon the sea, in a place where we never yet saw a single tree.” “This is indeed a marvel,” said he; “saw you aught else?” “We saw, lord,” said they, “a vast mountain beside the wood, which moved, and there was a lofty ridge on the top of the mountain, and a lake on each side of the ridge. And the wood, and the mountain, and all these things moved.” “Verily,” said he, “there is none who can know aught concerning this, unless it be Branwen”. Messengers then went unto Branwen. “Lady,” said they, “What thinkest thou that this is?”) GUEST 1849, 93/117.

⁵⁴ KOCH 1987, 38.

⁵⁵ WESTON 2020, 134 (“Half a troll upon earth I trow that he was” TOLKIEN 2006, 21.

how much time it must pass between their departure and its burial might suggest a type of ritual. A similar episode, with a slightly clearer description of the reasons the head keeps talking, can be found in the *Heimskringla* of Snorri Sturluson. This collection of sagas of the 13th century includes also the *Ynglinga saga*, where is told the story of Mimir. He is a god, sent by the Æsir as a hostage in order to make peace with the other family of gods, the Vanir, but who gets beheaded by them; his head is brought to Odin that

smurði urtum þeim, er eigi mátti fúna, ok kvað þar yfir
galdra ok magnaði svá, at þat mælti við hann ok sagði
honum marga leynda hluti.⁵⁶

Later on it is also mentioned the fact that “Óðinn hafði með sér höfuð Mímis, ok sagði þat honum mǫrg tíðendi ór ǫðrum heimum”.⁵⁷

Evidences from archaeology findings suggest that in Celtic tradition there was the conception that “the soul was contained in the head and that the head was both the center of life and emotions, as well as a symbol of divinity and the powers of the other-world (Megaw, 1970). It is also suggested that, by cutting off and keeping the heads of their enemies, warriors would gain control over the spirits of those deceased, whose heads — charged with divine power — would be able to facilitate interaction with the divine during ritual veneration (Armit, 2012).”⁵⁸ It is possible then to link the Green Knight’s severed head that keeps talking to the Celtic tradition.

A figure that belongs to the Arthurian tradition and whose features share similarities with Bran’s ones is the Fisher King, a key character of the Arthurian cycle of stories revolving around the Quest for the Graal. He can be found even in the oldest versions of the story and, even if he undergoes several changes through time, he is always presented as the king of a sterile land, heavily wounded and forced to wait for

⁵⁶ ADALBJARNARSON 1941, chapter 4 (“Smearred it with herbs that prevented it from decaying, and recited spells over it and imbued it with magic power so that it spoke to him and told him many secret things” FINLAY AND FAULKES 2011, 8).

⁵⁷ ADALBJARNARSON 1941, chapter 7 (“Óðinn kept Mímir’s head by him, and it told him much news from other worlds” FINLAY, FAULKES 2011, 8).

⁵⁸ SWEENEY 2024.

the arrival of the chosen knight who, by asking the right question, can heal him and obtain the Graal.

The powers attributed to the Graal echo the magic cauldron Bran gifts Matholwch but even more specific seems to be the reference to the wound both the Fisher King and Bran have. Bran is hit in the foot, as stated in *Branwen ferch Llŷr*

Ac o hynny y bu y meint goruot auu y wyr ynys y kedyrn .
Ni bu oruot ohýny eithyr dianc seithwyr abrathu
bendigeituran yn y troet agwenwynwaew. Sef seithwyr a di
hengis.⁵⁹

while the Fisher King is smitten in the crotch area. The weapon that strikes is similar, most of the times is a spear, and in the Fisher King case, it is even specified in the Post-Vulgate cycle and Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* that the spear is the Lance of Longinus; the symbolic meaning of this wound is closely linked to the area of the body it is inflicted upon, which is always around the genital area. This injury makes the king barren and his own land suffers the consequences of that.

In the *Perceval* of Chrétien de Troyes the king does not have a name but a maiden, who quite curiously is holding a dead knight “qui avoit colpee la teste”,⁶⁰ calls him the “Fisher King” because fishing is the only action that does not cause him pain.

Mes quant il se vialt deporter
ou d'aucun deduit antremetre,
si se fet an une nef metre
et vet peschant a l'ameçon:
por ce li Rois Peschierre a non,
et por ce ensi se deduit
qu'il ne porroit autre deduit

⁵⁹ (“In consequence of that, the men of the Island of the Mighty obtained such success as they had; but they were not victorious, for only seven men of them all escaped, and Bendigeid Vran himself was wounded in the foot with a poisoned dart.”) GUEST 1849, 98/146.

⁶⁰ KUNSTMANN 2019, 75 (“a knight she was holding, his head severed” BRYANT 2015, 30).

por rien sofrir ne andurer.
 Ne puet chacier ne riverer,
 mes il a ses rivereors,
 ses archiers et ses veneors
 qui an ses forez vont berser.
 Por ce li plest a converser
 an ce repere ci elués,
 qu'an tot le mont n'a a son oés
 nul si bien aeisié repere,
 et si a fet tel meison fere
 com il covient a riche roi.⁶¹

In some other versions the king has a personal name, such as in *Joseph d'Arimathie* of Robert de Boron, a text of the 13th century. In this poem the Fisher King is called Bron, a name very close to Bran.

In a Welsh version of the story, with many manipulations, “Peredur son of Efwrawg” – written around the 13th century and belonging to the Three Welsh Romances associated with the Mabinogion – instead of the Graal, the procession brings a severed head on a plate.

Gwedy tewi yspeit vechan. ar hyimy Ilyina dwy vorwyn yn
 dyiiot. adysgyl vawr y ryngtnt. aplienn gwr yny dysgyl.
 agwaet yn amyl yny chylch.⁶²

Along with Cùroi, both Bran the Blessed and the Fisher King seem to share similarities with the magic aspects of the Green Knight and the beheading theme,

⁶¹ KUNSTMANN 2019, 76 (“But when he wants some sport and pleasure he’s carried to a boat and goes fishing with a hook: that’s why he’s called the Fisher King. He finds enjoyment that way – he couldn’t manage any other sport at all: he can’t go hunting in the woods or marshes. But he has his men to hunt the wildfowl, and archers and huntsmen who go shooting in his forests. That’s why he’s chosen to live just here: in all the world he couldn’t find a retreat better suited to his needs, and he’s had a house built befitting a great king.” BRYANT 2015, 31).

⁶² (“And when the clamour had a little subsided, behold two maidens entered, with a large salver between them, in which was a man’s head, surrounded by a profusion of blood”) GUEST 1849, 248/312.

more than the hunting one which is almost irrelevant if not for the quotation in the Perceval.

The Fisher King fishes because he cannot hunt, like he would do for sport or for pleasure. This element, along with the proposed interpretation for sir Bertilak's name, Haudesert as "High Wasteland" or "High Hermitage"⁶³ – the same barren land the Fisher King rules – might link the Fisher King to the host-like figure of Bertilak more than the Green Knight one.

1.5 – *Arawn*

Returning to the Welsh Celtic tradition, there is the figure that maybe shares the most similarities from a narrative perspective with Bertilak: Arawn. He is one of the kings of the Underworld, called Annwfn and, in the same way of Cùroi and Bran the Blessed, is a figure present in many stories; the most similar one to sir Gawain is the first branch of the Mabinogion, also known as *Pwyll pendefig Dyfed*. In this tale, Pwyll, the prince of Dyfed, is hunting and finds a singular pack of dogs, whose characteristics clearly indicate their supernatural origins. The scene where they are described goes as follows

Ac yna edrych ohonaw ef ar liw yr erchwys heb hanbwyllaw.
edrych ar y carw. Ac or awelsei ef ohelgwn ybyt ny welsei
cwn un lliw ac wynt. Sef lliw aoed arnunt. Claerwynn lathreit.
Ac eu clusteu yn gochyon. Ac ual y llathrci wynnet y cwn y
llathrei cochet y clusteu. Ac ar hynny att y kwn y doeth ef.
agyrru yr erchwys aladyssei y carw ym eith. allithyaw y
erchwys ehunan ar y carw imeith.⁶⁴

⁶³ CRISTIAN 2022.

⁶⁴ GUEST 1849, 8/38("Then looked he at the colour of the dogs, staying not to look at the stag, and of all the hounds that he had seen in the world, he had never seen any that were like unto those. For their hair was of a brilliant shining white, and their ears were red; and as the whiteness of their bodies shone, so did the redness of their ears glisten. And he came towards the dogs, and drove away those that had brought down the stag, and set his own dogs upon it.").

Pwyll drives away these dogs and takes the stag they were hunting for himself. Later on he meets a man, on a light-grey horse who identifies himself as Arawn and accuses him of stealing his prey. In order to repay for his wrongdoing, Arawn asks Pwyll to take his place for a year and a day and defeat on his behalf another King of Annwfyn, Hafgan. Pwyll wins striking him only once, like Arawn instructed him to do, and they return to their respective kingdoms.

Many details connect this story with *sir Gawain's* poem, the same temporal unit of a year and a day, for instance, which is typical of Celtic tradition, or the fact that Arawn's wife does not sleep with Pwyll for the entirety of the year they spend together. It is not mentioned any attempt on her side to seduce Pwyll but she manifests surprise when the husband is lovely to her in bed, claiming that "For a year you have not spoken to me like this or been loving towards me"⁶⁵ and they both praise Pwyll's loyalty to Arawn.

A curious connection is made between Arawn and Bran the Blessed in the Peniarth MS 98B, where are transcribed two *englyn*s - a short Welsh poem of a variable structure, with each line using quantitative metre and *cynghanedd* (a repeating pattern of consonants and accent) – for the *Cad Goddeu*. *Cad Goddeu* is a long and obscure poem of the Welsh tradition, attributed to the bard Taliesin, which narrates the battle between Arawn and a magician for the possession of three animals that were stolen from Annwfyn; the magician wins as soon as he guesses the name of one of Arawn's warrior. The text refers to him with "Bran art thou called, of the glittering branches." and thus

Carngraff dy farch yn y dydd cad

Bann blaen fwern ar dy angad

Bran lorgric ai vrig arnad

Y gorfu Amathaon mad

Gwydion ap Don ai Cant.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ JONES 2019, 18 and MACKILLOP 1998, 19.

⁶⁶ "Sure-hoofed is my steed in the day of battle:/ The high sprigs of alder are on thy hand:/ Bran by the branch thou bearest/Has Amathaon the good prevailed." GUEST 1849, 347.

The majority of scholars agree that the Bran whose name is guessed is Bran the Blessed.

Many elements connect Arawn to both the Green Knight and Bertilak, from the capability of shapeshifting to the hunting element. The last one is particularly relevant because Arawn's hunt is a recurring element in Welsh folklore, especially concerning the wintertime. The king himself is considered as a winter deity, given that his opponent is the king Hafgan – whose name means “Summer White”.⁶⁷ Arawn's dogs, the so called Cŵn Annwn, are defined as spirit-hounds running in the air constantly chasing something, and their howling was regarded as an omen of death. They could be spotted in particular in the eves of St. John, St. Martin, St. Michael, AU Saints, Christmas, the New Year, St. Agnes, St. David, and Good Friday,⁶⁸ running through the fields, sometimes alone but more frequently guided by their master. The description of this figure is “a dark, almost black, gigantic figure, with a horn slung around his swarthy neck, and a long hunting-pole at his back”⁶⁹. Arawn and his dogs are sometimes followed by Mallt-y-Nos, or Matilda of the Night, a female figure the rides along with them. Many characteristics of Arawn such as the ghostly pack of dogs or the manifestation in precise days of the year, connect this figure to the vast folklore phenomenon of the Wild Hunt, that will be discussed in the second chapter.

⁶⁷ SHERMAN LOOMIS 1943, 173.

⁶⁸ The eves here mentioned that do not change according to holidays are respectively: the 23rd of June, 10th of November, 28th of September, 31st of October, 24th of December, 30th of December, 20th of January, 28th or 29th of February.

⁶⁹ TREVELYAN 1909, 47-8. Some of these characteristics return also in the description of Herne the Hunter, who will be analysed in chapter 2.

Chapter two – A tricky heritage: the Wild Hunt

2.1 – *The hunting scene*

A general agreed statement between scholars is that the hunting scene described in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is of great importance, as shown by the fact that the author dedicates an entire *fytt* to it and to the seduction scene. Tolkien himself explains how “the weight, length, and detailed elaboration of the Third Fit (and of the end of the Second Fit which defines the situation) are, as I have said, sufficient evidence to show where at least the prime attention of the poet was concentrated”.⁷⁰ For this reason, many studies have analysed its composition, its relationship with the seduction scene it is connected to, tracing in particular the possible analogies between the preys of the hunt and Gawain himself.

The hunting scene is composed of a number of features, namely the noise the hunters make in order to scare the prey once they spot it, the chase they perform in order to reach and kill it, the ritual breaking of the carcass and the distribution of the spoils of the day; some of these themes can also be found in the folkloric phenomenon of the Wild Hunt. This phenomenon has a long history in literature but reached its peak of interest and diffusion during the 14th-15th century, influencing courtly and religious literature. Given the impact this phenomenon had on the literary production of the time and the temporal coincidence between the composition of the poem and the maximum diffusion of the Wild Hunt, it is interesting to confront its dominant characteristics with the ones depicted during the hunting of sir Bertilak.

⁷⁰ TOLKIEN 2007, 83.

2.2 – Features of the Wild Hunt

The Wild Hunt is a phenomenon of the folklore, typical of the North Europe, described as a spectral group of people seen during night and whose vision is anticipated by a strong noise. As Houston emphasizes, “the English version [...] tells of a pack of hounds, generally accompanied by a huntsman, which rides through the air above houses and fields at various times of day or night”.⁷¹ The ghostly vision changes according to place and time, with the loud sound as the only element almost always recurring in each of the different versions.

The relevance of the recurring noise at the beginning of the apparition had scholars debate on its origin; a widely accepted theory emphasises the characteristics of the most common period of the year for the Wild Hunt: winter time – with specific days, Epiphany, the Sabbath⁷² and the Eve of St. Thomas (20th December), considered particularly favourable–. The thesis is that the strong winds, which are typical of the seasons, are the base for the noise motif.⁷³ On the other hand, another similar theory states that the origin for the noise are not the seasonal winds but instead, the cries of migrating wild geese.⁷⁴

Wild Hunt origins are not clear for scholars, given that mentions throughout history tend to be quite cryptic, so the debate still goes on.

Hutton’s contribution in the article *The Wild Hunt and the Witches’ Sabbath* is important insofar it reconstructs the philological work done about the Wild Hunt. The article successfully proves that the majority of modern studies are based on Grimm’s *Deutsche Mythologie* (1835) and suggests that the Wild Hunt is a combination of three

⁷¹ HOUSTON 1964, 153.

⁷² The Sabbath are modern pagan holidays, based on British and Irish quarter days, four days every year marking important events such as the payment of the rent or the starting of school, a tradition that goes back at least to the Middle Age. They are connected with Sun’s movements, divided in minor Sabbaths, Jule (the winter solstice), Mabon (the Autumn Equinox), Ostara (the Spring Equinox) and Litha (the Summer Solstice) and major Sabbaths, Samhain (which marks the end of the harvest season and the beginning of Winter), Imbolc (feast day of St. Brigid), Lughnasadh (which marks the beginning of the harvest season) and Beltane (which marks the beginning of summer).

⁷³ HOUSTON 1964, 157.

⁷⁴ SHERMAN LOOMIS 1943, 12.

different traditions: a procession of female benevolent spirits, a host of dead people and a singular spectral huntsman, often demonic.⁷⁵

The tradition of benevolent women, that closely resembles the Celtic Fairy Host tradition, has its oldest written record in the *Le jeu de la feuillée*, a text of the 13th century, written by the poet Adam de la Halle, who merges the so-called *Maisnie Hellekin*, the benevolent women host and the *Fayes*. The reference seems more like an individual reworking of traditional material and not a folkloric tale written down.

J'oi le maisnie Hellekin,
Mien ensient, ki vient devant.
Et mainte clokete sonnans,
Si croi bien ke soient chi près.⁷⁶

The benevolent women host disappears from tradition after that until the 17th century. On the other hand, the host of the dead is a much older phenomenon and, according to Hutton in his *The Wild Hunt and the Witches' Sabbath* it can only be traced back to the North Europe tradition. This thesis is inferred by the lack of references to wandering bands of dead people in Greek and Roman literature, whereas it displays only single ghosts. The host becomes particularly relevant in the cultural and literary context of medieval Europe, especially from the 11th century on.

A possible cause for this specific interest in the dead army of the Wild Hunt can be ascribed to the necessity felt by Medieval society to know the whereabouts of the souls waiting for the Final Judgment. This “lack of theoretical perspective on the span of time that the soul spends from death to the Final Judgment”, as stated by Fiore in his article «*Caccia Selvaggia*» e «*Schiera Furiosa*» *Nel Medioevo: una discussione e qualche Prospettiva*, encourages to seek answers in the folkloric tradition and in the dead host.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ HOUSTON 1964, 175.

⁷⁶ LANGLOIS 1923, 24 (“I think I hear the merry throng/ Of Hellekin’s troupe coming on ahead. /And ringing the bells to wake the dead./ They must be nearby, in the hollow” MCGREGOR 1991).

⁷⁷ FIORE 2004, 566.

This theory is contrasted by Hutton, who doubts the host's nature of popular tradition, suggesting instead that it might be a clerical and literary construct, based also upon the fact that, up to all the 12th century, only people from the Church wrote about these visions.⁷⁸

Clerics did not have a good opinion on the Wild Hunt and references they made about it were emblematic of a dissolute and chaotic behaviour. An example of that is the invective letter of the archbishop of Canterbury in 1175 where he suggests to the clerics of the royal court to join the *milites Herlewini*⁷⁹; however, scholars believe that the actual demonization of the Wild Hunt by the Church started only from 1300s on, when it became necessary to associate the host of dead to Hell so that it would not interfere with the concept of the Purgatory.⁸⁰

2.3 – *Earliest literary references*

To pinpoint the exact moment when the Wild Hunt is first mentioned in literature is a difficult task, because there are plenty of references to riders in the sky, especially during the night, but specific nominal references can be found only from the 11th century on.

The first mention in the British literature can be found in some Old English charms, a group of medical remedies and spells, collected in two manuscripts, namely the London British Library Royal MS 12 D XVII also known as *Bald's Leechbook* (of mid 10th century) and the London British Library Harley MS 585, the *Lacnuga*, probably written in the late 10th or early 11th century. The interesting fact about these charms is that along with the herbal remedies proposed for various problems, going from physical pain to possession, there are also verbal spells that need to be performed, spoken aloud or written down. In particular, there is a group of charms, from A1 to A14, that is considered by scholars⁸¹ as the closest to the pagan tradition, where the

⁷⁸ FIORE 2004, 568.

⁷⁹ HUTTON 2014, 167.

⁸⁰ FIORE 2004, 569 and Grendon 1909, 168.

⁸¹ GRENDON, "The Anglo-Saxon Charms.", 124.

poetic compositions are longer and more elaborate and refer to pagan costumes and practises.

The charm A1, which proposes the remedy for a sudden stitch, opens up with a series of herbs that must be consummated but goes on with a sort of exorcism, identified as such by the repetition of the formula “Ūt lȳtel spere gif hēr inne sīe!”, that also refer to a noisy host. The text goes as follows:

- Hlūde wæran hȳ lā hlūde ðā hȳ ofer þone hlæw ridan
wæran ānmōde ðā hȳ ofer land ridan.
Scyld ðū ðē nū þū ðysne nīð genesan mōte!
Ūt lȳtel spere gif hēr inne sīe!
- 5 Stōd under linde, under lēohtum scylde,
þær ðā mihtigan wīf hyra mægen beræddon
and hȳ gyllende gāras sændan.
Ic him oðerne eft wille sændan:
flēogende flanne forane tōgēanes.
- 10 Ūt, lȳtel spere, gif hit hēr inne sȳ!
Sæt smið, slōh seax lȳtel,
[...] īserna wund swīðe.
Ūt, lȳtel spere, gif hēr inne sȳ!
Syx smiðas sætan, wælspera worhtan.
- 15 Ūt, spere, næs in, spere!
Gif hēr inne sȳ īsenes dæġl,
hægtessan geweorc, hit sceal gemyltan!
Gif ðū wære on fell scoten, oððe wære on flæsc scoten,
oððe wære on blōd scoten, [oððe wære on bān scoten],
- 20 oððe wære on lið scoten, næfre ne sȳ ðīn lif ātæsed!

Gif hit wære ēsa gescot oððe hit wære ylfa gescot
oððe hit wære hægtessan gescot, nū ic wille ðīn helpan.
Þis ðē tō bōte ēsa gescotes, ðis ðē tō bōte ylfa gescotes,
ðis ðē tō bōte hægtessan gescotes: ic ðīn wille helpan.

25 Flēoh þær on fyrgen, [seo þā flāne sende]!
Hēafde hāl westu! Helpe ðīn drihten!⁸²

There is no nominal reference to the Wild Hunt but many of its typical characteristics are present, specifically the oldest ones: the strong noise that announces the arrival, the act of riding (ll. 1-2), whether it is done upon the field or flying above, the fact that the author admonishes to take cover from an imminent onslaught (l. 3), which suggests a dangerous nature for this host. The supernatural element is given by the presence of what are referred to as “mighty dames” (l. 6), who can possibly be interpreted as hags, as the quote from lines 17 and 22 would suggest.

The version that maybe more than any other greatly influenced the following lines, with the descriptions of bad omens and their interpretations,⁸³ probably derives from the works of Pope Gregory I. In his *Homiliae XL in Evangelia* and his *Dialogues* – both written by the end of the 6th century – he indicates the apparition of flaming armies in the sky as one of the signs of the Armageddon. He never openly mentions the Wild Hunt by name, so the reference comes off as oblique at best, but his images were borrowed later on for almost every description of this phenomenon.

⁸² GRENDON 1909, 164 (“Loud were they, O loud, when over the hill they rode; rode;/Infuriate were they when over the land they rode./Now shield yourself, that you this onslaught may survive!/Out, little spear, if here you are!/Underneath linden I stood, a light shield beneath,/Where mighty dames their potent arts prepared/And sent their whizzing spears./Another will I send them back: A flying arrow right against them./Out, little spear, if here it is!/Sat the smith, forged his little knife, [...] with iron [blows] sore wounded./Out, little spear, if here it is!/Six smiths sat, war-spears they wrought./Out, spear, not in, spear!/If here [there] is no iron,/Work of witches, it shall melt!/Were you shot in skin, or were shot in flesh,/Or were shot in blood, or were shot in bone,/Or were shot in limb, may never your life be scathed!/If it were shot of gods, or it were shot of elves,/Or it were shot of hags, now you I’ll help./This for relief from shot of gods, this for relief from shot of elves,/This for relief from shot of hags: you will I help/Run away to the mountain flee [hag, who sent the dart]!/ Be hale in head! May the Lord help you! [my transl. based on the translation of GRENDON 1909, 164-67].

⁸³ FIORE 2004, 563.

According to the majority of scholars, the first explicit mention of the Wild Hunt dates to the 12th century with Orderic Vitalis' *Historia Ecclesiastica*. In the eighth book of the chronicle, the author tells the story of what happened to a priest named Walchelin on the January 1st 1091 AD.⁸⁴

The story comes as follows: Walchelin is travelling at night and while crossing a field he hears a sudden noise, like an oncoming army. He does not hide in time, so he is stuck in the field while a host of people stroll in front of him, tortured in various ways, either by physical means or by demons. He recognises the majority of them as people from his town who had died recently, who are being punished for their sins. Along with them, Walchelin meets his own brother who explains him that they are forced to ride until they have paid for all their sins, aided in the task by the prayers of their living relatives. He then bids Walchelin farewell, forbidding him to tell what he has seen for at least three days; Walchelin returns home and is deadly sick for an entire week, before he recovers.

In this story some of the typical characteristics of the Wild Hunt return, such as the sudden and strong noise or the dangerous nature of the vision – Walchelin falls ill for a week after the interaction with it – but more than the description provided by Orderic, the element that undoubtedly connects the episode to the Wild Hunt is the name used to identify it. Walchelin defines them as “sine dubio familia Herlechini”, a name that often returns in various texts from the 12th century on for identifying the Wild Host.

⁸⁴ CHIBNALL 1973, 236-51.

2.4 – *The Wild Hunt's leader*

Even if Orderic quotes Hellequin and this name is always present in texts that allude to the Wild Hunt, almost anything is known about it. Hutton in his article collects a number of examples where the Wild Hunt is referred to as “army” of Hellequin, like the already mentioned invective letter, or the *Mesniee Hellequin* quoted by Chrétien de Troyes in his *Philomena*.

Avuec ç’iert si bone ovriere
D’ovrer une porpre vermoille
Qu’an tot le mont n’ot sa paroille.
Un diaspre ou un baudequin
Nes la Mesniee Hellequin
Seüst ele an un drap portiere.⁸⁵

These types of references might suggest that Hellequin is a singular specific character, but rarely a leader is physically described in the host – Orderic himself never mentions a leader of the host Walchelin sees.

The etymology of the name offers no more clarity either, given that “the Old French *herle* (‘tumult’), the Germanic *Heer* (‘army’) and *Thing* (‘assembly’), or *König* (‘king’), and the Anglo-Saxon *helle-cynn* (‘hell-kin’)”⁸⁶ seem to be equally plausible. The only theory that has been discredited is the one that hypothesized a connection with the name of *hell*, given that – as reported by Browne in the article “*Harlequin*” and “*Hurly-Burly*”, *Herlequin* – in Latin *Herlechinus* – is the older form and in phonetic change it is much easier to lose an *r* than to gain one.⁸⁷ There is also a close

⁸⁵ CORMIER 1986, 208 (“Moreover, she was so skilled in working precious purple cloth that she was without equal in the whole world. She would know how to make arabesque in silk or embroidered vestments, and could even portray in cloth a family array of merry pranksters” Cormier paraphrases *Mesniee Hellequin* as “a family array of merry pranksters”, an interpretation of the name closer to the *charivari* discussed in 2.5).

⁸⁶ HUTTON 2014, 166.

⁸⁷ HAND BROWNE 1910, 23.

resemblance with the names of *Arlecchino* in the Italian *commedia dell'arte*'s character and Alichino, one of the devils mentioned by in Dante's in the *Inferno*.⁸⁸

Some modern studies have proposed as the leader of the Wild Hunt Herne the Hunter, a figure of the British folklore cited for the first time in Shakespeare's *The merry wives of Windsor* (1602):

There is an old tale goes that Herne the Hunter,
Sometime a keeper here in Windsor Forest,
Doth all the wintertime, at still midnight,
Walk round about an oak, with great ragged horns,
And there he blasts the tree, and takes the cattle,
And makes milch-kine yield blood, and shakes a
chain
In a most hideous and dreadful manner.
You have heard of such a spirit, and well you know
The superstitious idle-headed eld
Received and did deliver to our age
This tale of Herne the Hunter for a truth.⁸⁹

He is considered, "like Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, [...] a personification of natural disruption"⁹⁰ and is believed to be the English version of the Wild Hunt leader by Grimm –the first scholar who connected Herne the Hunter to the Wild Hunt itself. Later on, studies have suggested relations between him to and pagan natural deities, like Murray's book *The God of the witches* where she quotes that not only he was spotted in the Windsor Forest and that "he became the favourite accusation against all political enemies that they were in league with 'the foul fiend' who appeared to them in human form horned like a bull or a stag"⁹¹ and more specifically to the Wild Hunt.

⁸⁸ PEAKE 1922, 28.

⁸⁹ CRANE 2019, Act. 4, Sc. 4.

⁹⁰ CARROLL 1977, 207.

⁹¹ MURRAY 1970, 34.

The *Historical dictionary of witchcraft* by Bailey quotes as well the figure of the Wild Hunt leader saying that “the [Wild] hunt was usually led by a divine or semi-divine figure, either female [...] or male, often called Herne the Hunter”.⁹² Hutton disregards this connection stating that “its adoption by scholars was entirely due to its prominence in modern German folklore”.⁹³

Authors have proposed their theories for the etymology of the name of Hellequin throughout history, concentrating in particular on historical figures like Frederick II, Hugh Capet, Charles V,⁹⁴ as well as legendary ones, among which the very same king Arthur, or related to pagan mythology like the god Wotan. Especially in the first case, the legend told assumed a punishing connotation in their regards, in order to expiate sins committed in life, in particular those regarding the relationship of the historical character with the Church and the Mass. Mostly, the rulers were punished for hunting during Mass or disturbing it by hunting too close; in other cases, it was granted the wish of never stop hunting or a punishment for evil deeds done.⁹⁵ A similar explanation is given in the 19th century for the so called Mallt-y-Nos, or Matilda of the Night, the maiden who in some tales rides along with Arawn and his *Cŵn Annwn*. According to the legends, she either was a Norman woman found of hunting who one day stated that “if I cannot hunt in heaven I would rather not go there” and her prayer was answered – becoming soon a punishment –, or a woman who was punished by her husband for disobeying his order of never hunting again. The man throws her out into the courtyard, where she was seized by a whirlwind, carried away, and doomed to ride on the storm for all eternity.⁹⁶

⁹² BAILEY 2003, 143.

⁹³ HUTTON 2014, 164.

⁹⁴ FIORE 2004, 560.

⁹⁵ BINNALL 1935, 80 where the scholar summarises a story from Lower Saxony. This describes how a wealthy prince was so devoted to hunting that the lives of any of his subjects were forfeit if they interfered any way with his sport, as, for instance, when a boy barked willow to make himself a whistle, he was put to death by being disembowelled and his entrails were tied round the tree. When this Nimrod at last died, his soul could find no rest but was condemned to hunt through the woods for ever, and still, on a stormy night, the peasant hears the crack of his whip, the baying of the pack and the hoof-beats of his spectral steed as he crashes through the forest! This story seems to echo in a way the legend of Jack O' Lantern.

⁹⁶ TREVELYAN 1909, 49-50. Grimm in *Deutsche Mythologie* tells a similar story about frau Gauden, a noble woman so found of hunting that she claimed that she did not care to enter heaven if that meant she could hunt forever. Her twenty-four daughters expressed the same desire and one day, while they all were hunting, they were turned into dogs, following their mother's orders. From that day on, they

An interesting variation is proposed by Walter Map, in the *De nugis curialium*, a series of tales and anecdotes of people and places written from 1181 up to his death in 1210, where he indicates the name ‘Herla-kin’ as the origin of Hellequin.⁹⁷ According to the legend he refers to Herla was king of Bretons and was invited by a dwarf king in the Underworld to attend to his wedding, where he was given a “canem modicum sanguinarium”⁹⁸ as a gift. When Herla came back from the Underworld, he found out that two centuries had passed since his departure. From that moment on, he is obliged to follow the underworld hound the dwarf king gifted him in order not to become ashes.

This story presents many similarities with Welsh Celtic tradition, in particular the structure of the story resembles the first branch of the *Mabinogion*, with the shift of places between Pwyll and Arawn, and the idea that one must follow precise rules in order not to gain back immediately all the years that has passed echoes the final part of the second branch of the *Mabinogion*, the Branwen’s one, where Bran’s men cannot for any reason touch the sand of the shore otherwise they would become immediately ashes.

Hutton points out though how this version can be found only in Map’s story and how it seems “to be at odds with Ordericus Vitalis’ [...] concept of such apparitions as the sinful dead”.⁹⁹ It is nonetheless interesting to quote, given that it is the only one featuring explicit Celtic origins and where the punishment element is lacking.

The fact that the most ancient mentions use the name but do not identify a figure who carries it in particular, opens up – according to Hutton – the possibility that more than a personal name, Hellequin and its variations were used as a description of the phenomenon in general.

hunt during nights, lamenting their impious desire, until the Final Judgment. Grimm, “Deutsche mythologie”, 877.

⁹⁷ JAMES 1983, 26-31.

⁹⁸ “a small bloodthirsty dog” [my transl.]. The same definition is given for Bertilak’s dogs in the third day of the hunt, as discussed in 3.2.

⁹⁹ HUTTON 2014, 167.

2.5 – *Charivari*

Set apart from the Wild Hunt related ones, a reference to the name of Hellequin can be found in a text of the 13th century, dedicated to another medieval cultural phenomenon: the *charivari*. The *charivari* corresponds to a set of practices of popular censorship against violators of communitarian laws of the preindustrial rural society.¹⁰⁰ Even though the apex of its diffusion is in the 17th and 18th centuries, written traces can be found up to the 13th century, like the *Roman de Fauvel* that will be discussed later on.

These manifestations of censorship were carried out by groups of young men reunited in associations, whose names were inspired by monastic nomenclature (for example ‘abbey of the fools’ or ‘the mad’ or ‘the asses’) or by military one (like ‘company of the youth’), as stated by Ginzburg in his *Charivari, Associazioni Giovanili, Caccia Selvaggia*.¹⁰¹

The *charivari* has in common with the Wild Hunt the violent expressive method and the noise component, but the punitive aim that the Wild Hunt acquired only from the 13th century on is actually deeply inherent to the *charivari*; in particular, the punishment was carried out against people who remarried. A clear example of the relevance of such a tradition is given by the Synod of Avignon in 1337 which distinguishes between *Malprofiech*, the habit of welcoming the spouses with noises, obscenities, money and other things, and the *chalvaricum*, a turmoil against widowed man and women who remarried.¹⁰² Ginzburg in his article *Charivari, Associazioni Giovanili, Caccia Selvaggia* provides the hypothesis done by N. Zemon Davis in *Le culture del popolo*, where she states that this fury can be explained by the social events occurred during the 14th century. It is plausible that in a society economically and demographically depauperated by the Plague a second marriage – that removed young

¹⁰⁰ FIORE 2004, 561.

¹⁰¹ GINZBURG 1982, 170.

¹⁰² Ivi, 173.

people from the group of possible suitors – was not seen with a keen eye and that remarriage was punished by social laws.¹⁰³

Another connection that can be traced between the Wild Hunt and the charivari is the fact that young men dressed and acted like the dead people of the town while performing,¹⁰⁴ getting close to the interpretation of the Wild Hunt as a host of dead that the Church tried to banish.

The literary reference that connects Hellequin to the charivari is an interpolation of 1316 of the *Roman de Fauvel*, a 14th-century French allegorical verse romance of satirical bent.

In this interpolation a so called *chalivali* interrupts the celebrations of the marriage between the evil Fauvel and Vaine Gloire, causing disorder. Among all the characters involved, the only one who is called by name is Hellequin, described as a *grant jaiant*.¹⁰⁵ The other members of the host instead are given typical attributes of the devils – like the baskets¹⁰⁶ or the dead; elements that reconnect them to the imagery of the Wild Hunt.

A similar theme is then developed in the courtly literature between second half of the 13th century and first half of the 14th century. It is possible to find sinners, usually women, which are punished by being chased, mostly because they refused the love offered to them. A particular case is the treatise *De Amore* by Andreas Cappellanus. In Book I there is the dialogue *A nobleman addresses a noblewoman*, where the man, in order to win the heart of the reluctant woman he is pursuing, firstly describes her the

¹⁰³ A similar role, inspired by the charivari, can be found in the *festa dei cornuti* (“the holiday of those who have been cheated on”) on St. Martin Day (November 11th), typical of Italian tradition, that was aimed towards widowers who remarried or couples who joined in marriage in old age: the sin of the first ones was to unsettle the dead spouse while the second ones were guilty of denying their ancestors the possibility of a rebirth through their descendant – and depriving the community of new members (BALDINI, BELLOSI 2015, 116-8).

¹⁰⁴ GINZBURG 1982, 170.

¹⁰⁵ “a huge giant”. LÅNGFORS 1914, 165. This description – and the visive representation in the miniatures – suggests that the shift in Hellequin’s perception is happening. As emphasized in LECCO 2000, 65, instead of being presented as a *rude jaiant*, the character poses as a pagan and infernal entity.

¹⁰⁶ A similar iconography is shared also by the Krampus, a figure of Alpine folkloric tradition represented as a horned anthropomorphic goat figure, wielding a whip. They go along with Saint Nicholas on visits to children during the night of 5 December (therefore called *Krampusnacht*, Krampus Night) and those children who behaved badly are taken and put inside the huge basket they carry on the back.

palace of Love, asking her where she would like to be. The palace has four entrances, one for each cardinal point, guarded by women. The eastern one is reserved to the god of love alone, while the ladies at the south entrance are the ones who enquire the man requesting entry, the western entrance allows anyone and the northern one is perpetually closed. Once the lady states she would gladly join the ladies at the north entrance, she admonishes her, describing a vision he had once while serving a noble lord, which he identifies by the name Robert. They were one day riding in very hot weather through the royal forest of France when the man gets lost. Guided by the sound of an upcoming group of people on horse, he encounters the army of the god of Love.

Quumque magis equitantibus appropinquarem et attentius decoram valde multitudinem intuerer aspiciens, vidi hominem praecedentem et in spectabili equo nimis formoso sedentem aureo diademate coronatum.

[...]

‘Rogo igitur ut mihi cures, si libet, asserere cuius sit haec quam cerno militia, et quare mulier tam formosa adeo vilem equum et tam sibi abiecta praelegit vestimenta portare.’

Cui et ipsa mulier respondit: ‘Hic, quem vides, est exercitus mortuorum. Quod quum audissem, meus statim ultra modum turbatus est animus et facies alterata, et mea cuncta de propriis sedibus coeperunt ossa moveri. Tremebundus igitur factus et nimis exterritus libenter volui ab hac societate discedere; sed haec me coepit statim suo confortare sermone et ab omni me periculo illaesum conservare promisit. Sic enim ait: ‘Securior hic et tutior permanebis quam in domo paterna.’ Quo audito iam quasi emissum vivificantem resumpsit spiritum et ei propius accedens de omnibus coepi diligenter inquirere, et ipsa seriatim cuncta narrare ita dicens: ‘Miles, quem vides cuncto populo aureo diademate coronatum praecedere, deus est amoris, qui singulis septimanis una die praesenti cernitur

adiunctus militiae et cuique, prout bene vel male gessit in vita,
mirabiliter pro cuiusque retribuit meritis.¹⁰⁷

The woman encountered in the army of the god of Love explains him how women refusing love are punished within the army itself.

The episode echoes quite well the typical characteristics of the Wild Hunt, with the noise guiding the man who encounters the group, the army parading is led by a single figure, the members of the group are the dead and they are punished for the sins they have committed. It is evident how the folkloric matter was adjusted to the courteous literature's topoi.

Andreas Cappellanus particular perspective, according to scholars, influenced later on text production,¹⁰⁸ as shown by the anonymous *lais* from the late 13th or early 14th century *Sir Orfeo*. The *lais* is a courteous retelling of the myth of Orfeo and contains many parallelisms with Andreas Cappellanus' work, namely the encounter between Orfeo and the king of fairies, which shares close resemblance with the parade of the army of the god of love.

Oft in hot undertides,
The king o fairy with his rout
Com to hunt him al about
With dim cri and bloweing,
And houndes also with him berking;

¹⁰⁷ "Then, as I drew nearer to the riders, and ran my eyes more closely over the extremely handsome crowd, I saw the leader mounted on a splendid and most handsome horse, and crowned with a golden diadem. [...] I answered: "I beg you then, if it is your pleasure, take the trouble to inform me whose company this is before my eyes, and why so beautiful a woman has consented to ride so mean a horse and wear such foul garments." To this the woman replied: "The army you see is the army of the dead." "When I heard this, my mind was at once in uncontrolled turmoil, my face blanched and all my bones began to jerk from their natural positions. So trembling and in utter terror I was all for leaving that company, but the lady at once began to lend me courage with her words, and promised to keep me unharmed from every danger. Her words were: "You will be more safe and sound staying here than in your own father's house." When I heard this, I began to breathe again the breath of life after virtually expiring. Drawing nearer to her I began studiously to question her on every detail, and she began to tell me everything point by point in these words: "The knight whom you see ahead of the whole body, crowned with a golden diadem, is the god of love. One day every week he is to be seen in company with his army here, and grants wondrous recompense to each individual according to their deserts, depending on whether their achievements in life have been good or evil." WALSH 1982, 106-9.

¹⁰⁸ LECCO 2000, 71. Boccaccio's famous novel of *Nastagio degli Onesti* belongs to this literary tradition.

Ac no best thai no nome,
 No never he nist whider they bcome.
 And other while he might him se
 As a gret ost bi him te,
 Wele atourned, ten hundred knightes,
 Ich y-armed to his rightes,
 Of cuntenaunce stout and fers,
 With mani desplaid baners,
 And ich his swerd y-drawe hold -
 Ac never he nist whider thai wold.¹⁰⁹

The change these lays suggest is not about the role of Hellequin – who remains a ruthless and punishing judge – but in the ethic of the judgment itself. The perspective is not anymore neither pagan nor Christian but courtly, and according to the courtly code, the only legitimate law was the one of Love and the only sins those against Love.¹¹⁰

It is possible to say then that, from the 13th century on, the Wild Hunt obtained a stable role in literature, even though it was determined by the type of text and its context of creation. In the religious literature there is an attempt to banish and demonize it –¹¹¹ so that it would not pose as a threat to the rising idea of Purgatory, while the courtly literature borrows its visual aspects and translates them in the new role of an entity that punishes the sins of love according to a law that is superior to human and religious ones.

¹⁰⁹ LASKAYA, SALISBURY 1995 ll. 282-96 (Often in hot mornings,/The king of fairy with his company/Come to hunt all around him/With faint cries and blowing (of horns),/And hounds also with him barking;/But they caught no beasts,/Nor ever did he know where they went./And at other times. As a great army by him went,/ Well equipped, ten hundred knights,/ all properly armed/ Of appearance stout and fierce,/ With many unfurled banners,/ And each his sword drawn holding/ But never he knew where they went. [my transl.]).

¹¹⁰ LECCO 2000, 71.

¹¹¹ FIORE 2004, 567.

2.6 – Odin

Another figure that has been centre of debates between scholars is undoubtedly Odin. This deity belongs to the Norse mythology tradition and has been identified by some scholars as the leader of the Wild Hunt, with the name of Woden.

The first to theorise this connection has been probably Grimm, in his *Deutsche Mythologie*, when he states that

Es ist schon s. 121 zusammenhang zwischen dem wütenden
heer und Wuotan behauptet worden, dem namen wie der
sache nach verknüpft sich ihm dieser gott.¹¹²

Grimm continues listing a number of ways of saying from Scandinavia or Germany for identifying the bad weather. Some of them are, for example, *det är Odens jagt*, *Oden far förbi*, *Oden jagar* – all meaning that it is Odin who rides by.

Besides nominal references, tradition offers other parallelisms between the Wild Hunt, both as a host of dead and as incarnation of winter storm, and the god.

Odin is said to dress in grey¹¹³ and as the Swedish way of saying show, storms were often reconducted to him.¹¹⁴

He also has a strong connection with the dead,¹¹⁵ in particular with the souls of the most valorous warriors who get – either by him or more often by his maiden, the Valkyries – taken from the battlefield.

Glaðsheimr heitir inn fimmti,
þar er in gullbjarta

¹¹² GRIMM 1844, 871 (“I have already affirmed on p. 132 a connexion between this wutende heer and Wuotan, the god being linked with it in name as in reality.” STALLYBRASS 1883, 918-9).

¹¹³ BENAMOS 1981, 402. The same colour is typically attributed to Arawn who is, among all the figures of the Welsh Celtic world, maybe the closest one to his characterization, given that he is the king of the Underworld, clad in grey and connected with the theme of the hunt. Both in the Welsh and German tradition, the leader of the Wild Hunt is clad in grey (TREVELYAN 1909, 48 and Grimm, “Deutsche mythologie”, 883).

¹¹⁴ RYAN 1963, 472.

¹¹⁵ MEANEY 1966, 113 reports the scepticism of J. de Vries about it given that Odin was connected to the dead and, using his words “it is unlikely that they would have imagined him as leading only the restless spirits haunting the winter gales”.

Valhöll víð of þrumir;
en þar Hrofr kýss
hverjan dag
vápndauða vera.¹¹⁶

Valkyries might represent the strongest link between Odin and the Wild Hunt: they are the ones with the duty of flying over battlefields looking for the souls of the most valiant warriors in order to take them to the Valhalla – the hall where these warriors drink and dine together waiting to fight again during the end of the world.¹¹⁷

The reference in the Anglo-Saxons' charm to the "mighty dames" (line 6) is generally considered to be about witches, even though J. S. Ryan interprets them as Valkyries,¹¹⁸ a theory contested by Meaney because it is considered a too vague reference.¹¹⁹

In conclusion, scholars seem to be conflicted with the idea of Odin being the origin of the Wild Hunt. No ancient text explicitly mentions the god as the leader of the Wild Hunt but the two figures indeed share similarities, like the colour they wear. Nonetheless, it is not possible to determine with certainty if the deity was ever interpreted as the leader and he does not seem to share any similarity with the other figures taken into consideration as base, save for Arawn, therefore it is difficult to consider it as the possible base for the characterization of sir Bertilak or for the hunting scene in general.

¹¹⁶ JÓNSSON 1954, ll. 40-5 ("The fifth is called Glǫðsheimr where, the hall of Valhalla stands golden-bright: There Hropt, chooses daily/Warriors slain by weapons. [my transl. based on AUDEN, W. H. AND TAYLOR, P. B 1976].)

¹¹⁷ This image of souls waiting recalls in a way the idea of wandering of the dead during the 14th century waiting for the Final Judgment.

¹¹⁸ RYAN 1963, 477.

¹¹⁹ MEANEY 1966, 114.

2.7 – Final remarks

In conclusion it can be said that the Wild Hunt, especially in the connotation it gained during the 14th century, does not seem to be the base for the composition of the hunting scene presented in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. None of the possible variations the Wild Hunt could have in literature of the time is present; the oldest one is the farthest away, mostly because the realism the poem is permeated with, clashes with the concept of apocalyptic visions described by Pope Gregory I or in the Anglo-Saxons' charm, even if the time of the year the scene takes place in coincides with the one of the Wild Hunt.

The hunting scene of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* lacks the punitive connotation: even if the preys can be considered as a metaphor for Gawain, who is in a way participating in an adultery, the punishment inflicted by the Wild Hunt – in all its versions, for example the charivari one – is always on a social level. It needs to be performed in front of people and in that scene only the hunters and the prey are present.

The only element that can actually connect the scene in the poem with the Wild Hunt is the noise. It plays an important role during the first day because huntsmen succeed by blowing horns and shouting, so that the din can confuse the animals and push them towards the archers; the second day as well, the noise is used as a strategy, this time for exciting the dogs to run after the boar; the third day maybe is the most interesting one because this time they all gather around the fox they just killed and shout or blow the horn – the music is described as “Hit watz þe myriest mute þat euer men herde,/ þe rich rurd þat þer watz raysed for Renaude saule with lote”.¹²⁰ Even though it is indeed present and relevant, the noise mention must not be connected with the noise of the Wild Hunt; in this case, the noise serves as a further element of the realism the author inserts in his text more than a reference to the Wild Hunt. Furthermore, it is indeed an element ever present in the folkloric phenomenon but at the same time is also the most anonymous one – it does not allow the reader to understand which role the Wild Hunt is supposed to have, the punishing one or the bad omen or any other.

¹²⁰ “The merriest music that ever men harkened,/the resounding song there raised that for Reynard’s soul awoke” WESTON 2020, 175.

It can then be concluded that, even though the Wild Hunt was very popular in the literature of the time, particularly in the Norman courtly one, it did not influence the composition of the hunting scene in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Chapter three – The hunting scene

3.1 – *The hunting scene in the poem*

The scene occupies the third *fytt* of the poem, along with the seduction scene (ll. 1126-1996). They can furthermore be divided into three different scenes, one for each day, but the composition of the poem allows to consider them as a whole nonetheless. The hunting scene is closely connected with the seduction one, as emphasized by the fact that each hunting day contains the corresponding seduction scene. This choice by the author suggests a clear intention of binding together these two scenes and therefore, the narration they contain.

Out of the studies done upon the hunting scene, the majority concentrates on the third day of hunt, by far the most interesting and peculiar to analyse, and in general the aim is to trace a connection between the three animals that get hunted and sir Gawain himself.

3.2 – *Hunting during medieval time*

In order to better analyse the hunting scene itself, it must be understood how hunting was perceived and dealt with in the Celtic medieval Britain during the 14th and 15th century.

Even if there are references to hunting before 1066 AD, they refer “chiefly to the education or hunting of kings and great lords”¹²¹ and the concept of the hunt as a game and not as a mean of survival changed with the arrival of the Normans. It became prerogative of the nobles, especially after the introduction of reserves.

Hunting became a privilege, and this also determined a shift in the attitude towards it; the audience of commoners and nobles excluded expected then manifestations of superiority from the owner of the land and this superiority was expressed by

¹²¹ MARVIN 2006, 84.

formalism. An example of this formalism is the clear division of roles based on social class, which can be found in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* itself. During the first day, there is the division of roles between the nobles, the ones in charge of shooting the animals, and the hunters, the ones whose role is to drive the preys towards them.¹²²

The exclusiveness of this practise is emphasized also by the fact that for a long period of time there are no written manuals in English. The first ones to appear are in Latin, then in French and lastly, around the 1410 with *The Master of Game*, in English. Written by Edward III's grandson Edward, second Duke of York, it is an almost literal translation of the *Livre de Chasse* by Count Gaston de Foix.

More than on practical information the manuals seem to concentrate on terminology and categorisations, for example the distinction between two types of animals: animals of venery and animals of chase.

The main difference between animals of venery and of chase were the way they could be hunted and the behaviour they showed towards hunters. The beasts of venery included “hart/hind, hare, boar, and wolf, which could be hunted by strength of hounds, but which cautiously stayed put when sought in their wooded haunts” while “the beasts of chase were “the fallow buck/doe, fox/vixen, and roedeer, which could be raised by a pack of scenting hounds (brachets/rachets) and hunted on the run in the *campestres*, the more openly wooded countryside.”¹²³

Even if *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* mentions that hunters follow specific rules while hunting, namely they do not hunt male deer because “Þe fre lorde hade defende in fermysoun tyme/Þat þer schulde no mon meue to þe male dere” (ll 1156-7), it is impossible to set a clear distinction between these two types of animals. The structure of the hunt repeats itself throughout the three days and there are no indications whatsoever of a different approach. A good indication would have been the name of the dogs used for hunting, given that in the manuals it is specified how they changed according to the animal chased, but even if in the text the names used are not always

¹²² PUTTER 2006, 357.

¹²³ MARVIN 2006, 105.

the same, they do not change according to the type of the prey. It is nonetheless interesting to deepen the type of names used.

In the first day of hunt, the dogs are referred to as *houndez*, *braches*, *hunteres*, *rachches* and *grehoundez*, with some spelling variations.

The names used as synonyms and their origins range from the Latin to French (*braches*¹²⁴ and *titleres*¹²⁵ are a borrowing from French, *kenet*¹²⁶ is supposed to be derived from the French *chenet*) to the Old Norse (*houndez*,¹²⁷ *hunters*,¹²⁸ *grehoundez* come from Old Germanic roots, *racheches* is considered as derived from the ON “rakki”¹²⁹), the only term whose etymology is uncertain is *doggez*.¹³⁰ The name “grehoundez” refers to an ancient Celtic breed of dog but it is interesting to notice how the term is also used to indicate the dogs belonging to Arawn, king of the Otherworld. Some of these terms are introduced on specific days, for example The second day adds *blodhoundez* and *doggez* while the third introduces *kenet* and *titleres*. The fact that the third day includes this last term suggests that these dogs might be different from the previous ones but it is safe to say that the vocabulary used for dogs does not distinguish the preys.

The difference between each type of animal is not relevant for the analysis of the text itself but it is indeed peculiar to examine, especially in the first day where does and hinds are hunted, two animals that belong to different groups. The difference is never stated nor the way they are chased varies but at the same time the author specifies that males are not hunted because of the laws that protect them, hinting at a deep knowledge

¹²⁴ “braches” in Oxford English Dictionary,

https://www.oed.com/dictionary/brach_n?tab=etymology&hide-all-quotations=true#15670294

¹²⁵ “titler” in Oxford English Dictionary,

https://www.oed.com/dictionary/titler_n1?tab=etymology&hide-all-quotations=true#1261772250

¹²⁶ “kennet” in Oxford English Dictionary,

https://www.oed.com/dictionary/kennet_n1?tab=etymology&hide-all-quotations=true#40101682

¹²⁷ “hound” in Oxford English Dictionary,

https://www.oed.com/dictionary/hound_n1?tab=etymology&hide-all-quotations=true#1340855

¹²⁸ “hunt” in Oxford English Dictionary,

https://www.oed.com/dictionary/hunt_v?tab=etymology#1160116

¹²⁹ “rache” in Oxford English Dictionary,

https://www.oed.com/dictionary/rache_n?tab=etymology#27236940

¹³⁰ “dog” in Oxford English Dictionary,

https://www.oed.com/dictionary/dog_n1?tab=etymology#6362755

of hunting laws. It is therefore difficult to imagine that he used the terms interchangeably out of ignorance.

3.3 – *Studies on the hunting scene of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

The theories proposed on the interpretation of the hunting scene and its values belong to two different approaches: the first compares the behaviour of the animal with the one of sir Gawain, suggesting that the prey of the day reflects the attitude that the knight himself presents; the other theory on the other hand proposes a diametrical perspective, where the animals show the exact opposite of the behaviour the knight has throughout the corresponding seduction scene, until the third day where animal and knight behave similarly. This division seems to be a byproduct of the article by Henry L. Savage *The Significance of the Hunting Scenes in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, where he proposes that the author induces this comparison between each animal and the behaviour of sir Gawain.¹³¹

The difficulty with the analysis of the hunting scene is that the majority of studies concentrate on the third day, given that it is by far the most peculiar and presents slight differences with the other two, such as the type of animal that is hunted – from two animal of vengery to one of chase – the attitude shown by hunters during the day and there is a general different approach to the narration of the chase. The problem with this approach is that if the hypothesis of a correspondence between the fox, the animal chased during the third day, and sir Gawain is correct, then the same correspondence has to be applied also to the other two. This comes after the fact that the poem has a very repetitive structure, therefore every sequence is similar to those belonging to the same group, so the connection traced must include all scenes. This means that if one hunting scene is relevant, then all of them are as well and that the interpretation for one must apply also to the others. As far as studies have gone, there have yet to be proposed a cohesive vision that fits all the animals involved, given that every time one of them get excluded by the hypothesis or does not fit it very well.

¹³¹ Both KAITSUKA 2018, 354 and MCCLURE 1973, 375 reconduct to him the origin of this theory.

It is important then to consider each animal on its own and its meaning in the medieval world.

3.4 – *The relationship between animals and humans during medieval time*

The first element that must be considered is the medieval perception about animals. The Christian doctrine believed that they not only did not possess souls but also that humankind could have a sort of ownership over them, considering that in the Genesis God had given Adam the power to name them.¹³² There are anyway two examples of different approaches to animals where they are recognized partially a soul or a deeper connection with them is shown. The first element is found in the animal trials, during which some animals were judged and condemned for their crimes by a court, for example in 1378 a pig was executed in the village of Auxonne for the act of homicide of a child.¹³³ As irrational as this process might seem, it denotes that people attributed to these animals reason and will, since punishment could be inflicted “only if the culprits are thought to understand its meaning”.¹³⁴

The second example of a more positive connection with animals is the one of pets. As shown also by Chaucer in his *Canterbury Tales*, when describing the Prioress not only it is mentioned how she cries when she sees a dead or injured mouse caught in a trap but even more important it is reported that she

Of smallè houndès had she that she fed
With roasted flesh or milk and wastel bread,
But sore wept she if one of them were dead
Or if men smote it with a yardè, smart;

¹³² “And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him. And out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof.” THE BIBLE, Book 1; Genesis 2:18-19.

¹³³ MACGREGOR 2019, 4.

¹³⁴ KAITSUKA 2018, 350.

And all was conscience and tender heart.¹³⁵

A deep connection between a human and an animal is described not only with pets but also with animals of labour. A striking example of this can be found in the *Carmina Cantabrigiensia*, also known as “Cambridge Songs”. In this collection of poems, contained in the manuscript MS Gg.5.35 in the Cambridge University, it is particularly relevant the song number 20. It narrates the death of a pregnant ass, belonging to a nun named Alfrad, that gets attacked by a wolf and the laments of the nuns that find her. The ass is defined as *fidelem*, l. 3 (“faithful”) and *caram*, l.16 (“dear”) but even more relevant is the fact that, once she feels her strength is fading, she “protulit grandem plangendo vocem/vocansque suam moritur domnam”,¹³⁶ Alfrad hears her cry and calls her sisters for help; they all gather but once they find out they are too late, they “crines scindebant, pectus tundeabant,/ flentes insontem asine mortem.”¹³⁷ Their reaction is typical of medieval people grieving for the dead and it demonstrates how “working animals were capable of receiving human affection and sympathy.”¹³⁸

One finds examples of human sympathy in medieval literature also for wild animals such as the poem of *The hunted hare*. This component belongs to the Porkington Manuscript, a miscellany of prose and verse mainly in Middle English, whose composition is supposed to be around the second half of the 15th century,¹³⁹ slightly after *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*'s one, and talks about the encounter the narrator has with a hare. The peculiarity of the text is not only the fact that the point of view is the one of the hare, who laments the impossibility to rest or even live on the land without being chased by men or women, but also the tone used. As pointed out by Yasuyuki Kaitsuka, “the words ‘mornyng’ (l. 3) and ‘mone’ (l. 4) clearly show [...] that the narrator feels pity for her [the hare], which is also illustrated by the word ‘Rouffully’ (l. 4), meaning ‘piteously’ ”.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁵ MURPHY 2013, 7.

¹³⁶ LO MONACO 2009, 184, ll. 11-12 (“Feeling her strength fading, she cried out loud, calling for her owner, while she died” [my transl.]).

¹³⁷ LO MONACO 2009, 184, ll. 29-30 (“All sisters split hairs and beat their chest, crying the death of the guiltless ass” [my transl.]).

¹³⁸ KAITSUKA 2018, 352.

¹³⁹ The supposition derives from the fact that the manuscript contains a table of eclipses calculated for the period from 1462 to 1481, as pointed out in the preface of HALLIWELL 1840.

¹⁴⁰ KAITSUKA 2018, 353-4.

Comprehending the relationship between people and animals during medieval time in Britain is crucial for the analysis of the text since one of the peculiar details of the hunting scene in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is the fact that the focus is almost always on the prey, not on the hunter.

This is not a prerogative of the poem itself but the novelty in the literature of the time it presents is the fact that the detailed description of the sentiments and behaviour of the animals is not approached from an allegoric point of view,¹⁴¹ as it was common in the literature of the time. Their animal symbolism does not appear to be utilized according to the allegorical conventions of bestiaries. This is what studies have concentrated on, considering it as one of the possible keys for interpreting the connection between the animals and sir Gawain and between the hunting and seduction scenes.

The emphasis the author puts on the feelings of the animals is suggested also by the fact that during the hunting scenes, the focus is almost solely on the animal chased so that the hunters are neglected and sometimes even disappear from the narration only to be mentioned once they interact directly with the animal or by the end of the day. For these reasons, to analyse the meaning of the hunting scene, the animals chased and their relationship with sir Gawain the starting point has been considered to be the sentiment all of them seem to share, more than the symbolic meaning of the animals themselves.

3.5 – First day of hunt

The same scheme gets repeated throughout the three days and it consists of Bertilak waking up, going to Mass, eating quickly and adventuring inside the woods with his dogs and men. After the killing of the prey of the day, the hunters dissect it and they return home where Bertilak exchanges the goods of the day with Gawain. The hunting is interrupted by the seduction scene that, excluding the second day, has

¹⁴¹ It should be mentioned though that on the third day the fox is also referred to as “Reynard”. This element, and the fact that the animal is given the definite article, led scholars to take him into a special consideration.

a longer number of verses – the difference varies according to the day, for instance the first one has a slight discrepancy of 28 lines, with the hunting scene having 102 and the seduction one having 130, but the third consists of 69 lines of hunting and 161 of seduction; the second one is distinguished from the others because in this case is the hunting to be more relevant with 112 lines against the 92 of seduction – and the structure of the *fytt* suggests a clear connection in the meaning of them.

The first day of hunt revolves around noise and fear. It opens up with the unleashing of dogs, then the hunters make “a rousing blast din” (l. 1148-9). The din, in original defined as both *rurd*, (l. 1148), and as *dyn* (l. 1159), is the focus of this entire day, both conceptually and physically. The noise is used for pushing preys towards the cliffs and hunters but also is the reason hinds and does are put in a state of fear.

Harts and bucks run away as well but do not get killed, because “þe lorde hade defende in fermysoun tyme/þat þer schulde no mon meue to þe male dere” (l. 1156-7) while hinds and does are pushed towards the cliffs and, those who run away, are shot with a fleet of arrows.

Bertilak does not have an active role in the hunt, it is merely reported that he hops on and off the horse “wyth joy” (l. 1176) until the dark of the night. The joy the lord manifests continues the positive nouns used for describing the hunt, that starts with Bertilak himself stating that he is going to gift Gawain whatever he “wynne” (l. 1106) and continues with the author using the term “laykez” (l. 1178) ‘game’ to describe the hunt.

The hunt is cut almost in half – 52 lines the first part, 50 lines the second – by the seduction scene, where the lady enters Gawain’s room and approaches the knight. The scene is full of adjectives that suggest cautiousness such as the door that opens “dernly” (l. 1183) or Gawain that “lurked” (l. 1195) pretending to be asleep in order to understand what she might be wanting from him. The lady jokes twice about binding him to the bed, praises his “honour”, his “hendelayk” (l. 1228) which is recognized by lords, ladies and every person alive, the author himself guides the narration towards this interpretation of Gawain defining him as “þe knyȝt with speches skere” (l. 1262).

She tries to seduce him alluding to the fact that they are all alone but Gawain eludes her stating he is an unworthy knight and offers instead to serve her. They speak until midmorning, when she stands and openly doubts he is indeed sir Gawain, because “Gawain gaynly is halden/and cortaysye is closed so clene in hymself/ couth not lyztly haf lenged so long wyth a lady/ bot he had craued a cosse, bi his curtaysye” (ll. 1297-1300). This insinuation indeed corners Gawain, who is then obliged to answer as a knight offering to kiss her in order not to displease her more. They share a kiss and she departs.

The narration returns to the hunt, where hinds and does are meticulously dissected, not by Bertilak but by the master. The breaking has been debated among scholars, particularly in regard to its length in the text and the amount of details it includes: the fact also that it is not the lord directly to do it has arisen more curiosity. According to Yasuyuki Kaitsuka, the accuracy in the description can be found only in a few hunting manuals; he also reports the theory of Ryan R. Judkins according to whom this “breaking scene stands as a microcosm of a medieval feudal society because of its role assignment through venison distribution among the participants based on their social rank”.¹⁴² This opinion is shared also by Avril Henry that states in her article *Temptation and Hunt in "Sir Gawain And The Green Knight"* that “The distribution of meat is equally correct, and above all complete.[...] There is a sense of totality, of generous inclusiveness in this noble blood sport conducted in the grand manner: everyone is involved”.¹⁴³ Even if the breaking has this social relevance in the medieval society, as Kaitsuka points out, it is not Bertilak the one involved in the action but “þe best” (l. 1325) and so the reasons this scene is included cannot be the same of the other texts of medieval literature: to demonstrate the courtiers’ correct education. For this reason, Kaitsuka hypothesizes that it “might have been incorporated into the story in order to add further weight to our sympathetic view of the animals triggered by the previous hunting description”.¹⁴⁴

The distinction between a female prey and a male one does not seem to have an impact on the symbology of the animal, given that in the medieval sources, the female

¹⁴² KAITSUKA 2018, 359.

¹⁴³ HENRY 1976, 189.

¹⁴⁴ KAITSUKA 2018, 361.

counterpart of the animal is hardly ever considered, if not for the sake of reproduction, like in *The Master of Game*. The only quote that distinguishes between the gender of animals is from Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies* where he describes the stag, the 'young stag', that he calls *hinnulus* and about the female deer, the doe,¹⁴⁵ he quotes the Martial Epigram XCIV that states "Dente timetur aper, defendunt cornua cervum:/inbelles dammae quid nisi praeda sumus?"¹⁴⁶

A tenable reading is that the Gawain-poet distinguishes hinds and does not for their specific meaning but as a further element of realism.

The most important source of information on the symbolic approach to animals in the medieval time are undoubtedly the bestiaries.

The interest in animals has a long history in human literature and it can be traced back up to the ancient Greek time; the approach was initially purely notional, as in the work of Herodotus, but from Aristotle on, it started to have a more scientific method. Pliny the Elder's *Historia Naturalis* of the 1st century AD became the major reference book which probably influenced, just one century later, the composition of the *Physiologus*. This text, whose author is unknown and whose date and place of composition are uncertain – probably the 2nd century in Alexandria – is the major influence for the medieval bestiaries. This text became the base for all the bestiaries¹⁴⁷ not only for the notions but also for the list of animals mentioned, which interestingly alternate between real and fantastic, such as syrens or gryphons.

During medieval time, animal studies were functional for human, diseases and generally human conditions were often compared to them according to physical or behavioural analogies – for example lupus or cancer¹⁴⁸ and their nature is interpreted in a Christian perspective. As summed up by George Jones, the interest was for "the

¹⁴⁵ BARNEY, LEWIS, BEACH, BERGHOF 2006, 248.

¹⁴⁶ "For his tusk is the boar dreaded, his horns defend the stag;/we, unwarlike does, what are we but a prey?" It is nonetheless interesting to point out that according to *The Master of Game*, the deer is way more dangerous than the boar, as shown by the old expression it refers in the chapter six: "Pour le sanglier faut le mire, mais pour le cerf convient la bière." ("After the boar the leech and after the hart the bier.").

¹⁴⁷ MERMIER 2004, 22.

¹⁴⁸ WALKER-MEIKLE 2023, 88-9.

fabulous creatures that either prefigured the birth and life of Christ or else illustrated the sins and foibles of mankind”.¹⁴⁹

In this context, the narrative of the stag or deer is particularly lucky, given that the majority of bestiaries identify its behaviour as a metaphor of Christ.

One of the first sources are the *Etymologies* of Isidore of Seville, written in the 7th century, presented as an encyclopaedia arranged by subject matter. Regarding the stag, it goes as follows:

Hi serpentium inimici cum se gravatos infirmitate persenserint, spiritu narium eos extrahunt de cavernis, et superata pernicie veneni eorum pabulo reparantur. [...] Dammula vocata, quod de manu effugiat: timidum animal et inbelle; de quo Martialis (13,94): “Dente timetur aper, defendunt cornua cervum; inbelles damae quid nisi praeda sumus?”¹⁵⁰

The stag being an enemy of the serpent and the fact that it hunts him blowing in its cave and then eats it, can be found also in other bestiaries.¹⁵¹ Every version varies in some respects, for example sometimes a precise span of time passes between each hunt the stag does,¹⁵² but the core remains the same and it has a clear Christological meaning. One of the texts that emphasizes more this theological aspect is undoubtedly the *Physiologus* of bishop Theobald, where the heavy horns the stag carries on its head are compared to the sins of humans, with the crucial distinction that the stag is not

¹⁴⁹ JONES 1979, 524.

¹⁵⁰ “They are antagonistic to serpents; when they sense themselves burdened with infirmity, they draw the serpents from their caves with the breath from their nostrils, and having overcome the malignancy of the poison, the deer are restored to health by eating the serpents. [...] The dammula (young doe) is so called because she runs away from one’s hand. She is a timid animal and unwarlike, like Martial says (Epigrams 13.94): The boar is feared for his tusk, horns defend the stag; what are we, unwarlike does, but prey?” BARNEY, LEWIS, BEACH, BERGHOF 2006, 248.

¹⁵¹ An example can be the bestiary of Philippe de Thaun that states that “LI cers ad itel nature, si cum dit escripture,/Qu’il vait fosse querant ù serpent sait gisant,/Quant trued ad serpent, en sa buche eve prent,/Si l’ad verset dedenz, puis fait suflemez,/Tant i sufle & alaine, fors le trait à grant peine;/Li cerf est curucez, puis l’ocist od ses pez./Or oez par maistrise, que i ceo signefie. (“The stag has that nature, as the writing says,/that he goes seeking a hole where there is a serpent lying,/when he has found a serpent he takes water in his mouth,/and throws it in, and then blows,/he blows there and breathes so long, that he draws it out with great labour;/ the stag is angry, and kills it with his feet.”) WRIGHT 1841, 17.

¹⁵² The most recurrent span of time is fifty years. This element survived in the tradition up to the 18th century, as shown in the Romanian bestiary, a particular bestiary belonging to the Romanian tradition that dates back to 1777 AD.

shamed by its horns as humans are of their sins.¹⁵³ The recurring battle between the stag and the snake is an allegory of the fight between Christ and the Devil and the water is the mean for removing the sins.

The stag is also important in the tradition of heraldry where, as stated by Savage, a person or family carried it because “had been distinguished by great caution and discrimination in knowing what to avoid and when to avoid it. Furthermore, such a person, or family, would be regarded as one in which there exists great tact in the observance of proper times and seasons, great ability to avoid embarrassing situations, great skill in knowing the proper thing to say and the proper time to say it”.¹⁵⁴

An echo of this characteristics can be found in *The Master of Game* that describes the hart as “The hertes bene the lightest beestes and stronge and mervelously of grete connyng”¹⁵⁵ and states that “[...]þer nys noon so good hunter in þe world whiche may þenk þe grete malice, and gynnes þat an hert can do, ne þer nys non so good hunter ne soo good houndes, þat mony tymes failen to sle þe hert and þat is by is wytt and by his malice and by his gynnes”.¹⁵⁶ The text then goes on reporting the same story of the other bestiarie on how the deer has a long live because of the fact that it eats snakes

“And 3it mony men seyn but I make non affirmacioun vpon þat whan he is ryght olde he hetyth a serpent wiþ his foote til she be wrothe, and þan he oteth hure and þan gooþ drynk, and þan he rennethe hidere and þidere to þe watir, and venyin be medled togydere and makeþ hym cast al his euel humours þat he had in his body and makeþ his flesshe come al newe”.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵³ WOOD RENDELL 1928, 78.

¹⁵⁴ SAVAGE 1928, 9.

¹⁵⁵ BAILLIE-GROHMAN, W. A., F. 1904, 15.

¹⁵⁶ BAILLIE-GROHMAN, W. A., F. 1904, 20-21.

¹⁵⁷ “And many men say, but I make no affirmation upon that, when he is right old he eateth a serpent with his foot till she be wrath, and then he eateth her and then goeth to drink, and then runneth hither and thither to the water till the venom be mingled together and make him cast all his evil humours that he had in his body, and maketh his flesh come all new” BAILLIE-GROHMAN, W. A., F. 1904, 20.

Among the many techniques this animal has for escaping, one seems particularly relevant: the wise hart eludes hunters hiding perfectly still, and only if he is found by the dogs flees away.¹⁵⁸

All these elements led scholars to identify a parallelism between the behaviour of the hinds and the one shown by Gawain: the knight awaits perfectly still in bed and only once he is reached, he moves; the lady approaches him with the same cautious that is due in order to hunt a cunning animal like the hart, and even if the stillness and silence of the room seem to be in contrast with the cacophony of the hunt that is happening at the same time, the aim is the same.¹⁵⁹ The same way the hunters surround the hinds, the lady jokingly threatens twice Gawain to bind him in his bed more tightly.¹⁶⁰ Not every scholar agrees with this interpretation, for example Kaitsuka states that “this structural parallelism tempts us to read the hunting scenes allegorically or metaphorically, but such interpretations are not plausible because any animal attributes indicated by critics are not seen in Gawain’s person or behaviour in the bedroom”¹⁶¹ while an interesting interpretation is offered by Peter McClure in the article *Gawain’s Measure and the significance of the three hunts in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* where he opposes the behaviour of Gawain to the one of the animals, whereas the animals show an excess in the reaction and the knight the right way of behaving. The majority of these observation concern not the three days of hunt but the encounter of sir Gawain and the Green Knight in the Green Chapel that will be discussed further on in the chapter.

The last dominant theme of the first day is undoubtedly courtesy. Out of the three, the deer hunt is the most frequent situation in literature featuring an idyllic atmosphere¹⁶² and it is often mentioned as a mean to show the expertise of the hero, as in the case of

¹⁵⁸ “[...] And he wil abyde stille, and 3if he alone and pe houndes fynde hym he shal go about his haunt wililiche and wiseliche and seche pe chaunge of opere deer, for to make the houndes envoise,! and for to loke wher he may abide.” (“He will abide still, and if he be alone and the hounds find him, he shall go about his haunt wilily and wisely and seek the change of other deer, for to make the hounds envoise (go off scent), and to look where he may abide.”) BAILLIE-GROHMAN, W. A., F. 1904n, 19 and SAVAGE 1928, 9.

¹⁵⁹ MORGAN 1987, 208.

¹⁶⁰ “I schal bynde yow in your bedde” (l. 1211) and “3e shal not rise of your bedde, I ryche yow better/ I schal happe yow here þat oper halves als” (ll, 1223-4) MORGAN 1987, 208.

¹⁶¹ KAITSUKA 2018, 370-1.

¹⁶² BURNLEY 1973, 4.

sir Tristram.¹⁶³ Bertilak however eludes this exhibition. Another element typical of the courtesy literature and that can also be found in the poem is its social aspect; the hunt not only is massive from a geographical point of view but also involves strategy and precise social elements.¹⁶⁴ Gawain is tested in his courtesy by the lady throughout the dialogue they have and she leverages on it in order to have him obey her request, for example stating that he has yet to ask her to kiss him, as a courteous knight should, to which he replies that he will indeed kiss her “as a knyzt fallez” (l. 1303).

3.6 - Second day of hunt

The second day is the shortest one, 204 lines against the 230 and 232 of the others, and it is also the only one where the seduction scene is shorter than the hunt, 92 lines against 112. The structure of the day is similar to the first one, with Bertilak getting up, having breakfast and listening to Mass before going into the forest where the dogs are unleashed and encouraged with shouts and horns. The dogs find traces of a boar, that burst out upon the hunters, scaring them with his massive size. The boar is indeed described as “breme”, “bor alþer-grattest” and “grymme quen he gronyed” (ll. 1441-2), he throws three of the hunters, wounds some dogs and flees at great speed. They try to hit him with arrows that only result in making the beast anger, that burst out upon them with brain wild for battle. Contrary to the first day, in this occasion Bertilak has a more prominent role, chasing the boar on the horse.

The scene moves into Gawain’s chamber, where once again the lady enters early in the morning. The author does not report any of their direct speech until she suddenly laughs and doubts once again he is Gawain, since he seems to have forgotten what she taught him the day before. He defends himself from the accusation by stating that he did not make any move fearing a rejection but the lady states he cannot be rejected,

¹⁶³ KAITSUKA 2018, 189.

¹⁶⁴ HENRY 1976, 188 “There is a steady diminution in the scale of the sport, the ceremony of its performance, the degree of social involvement in its success, and the quality of benefit derived from it. The deer-hunt is in every sense on a large scale [...] strategy is planned over a full landscape, and is all according to the rules.” and BURNLEY 1973, 9 “The first hunting scene is distant, exhibits a lack of involvement with its undifferentiated participants, and has associations of courtly order”.

since he is stout enough to use strength on anyone who would be so ill-bred to reject him. The defence of the knight revolves around the fact that the use of force is not accepted where he comes from and declares he is at her disposition to be kissed whenever she wants; she then leans and kisses him indeed. The lady goes on trying to test him, this time insinuating that he, that she defines as the most noble knight of their age, had not said to her words belonging to love-making simply because he does not consider her intelligent enough. Her attempts to tempt and test him goes on but the defences Gawain uses are defined by the author as ‘fayr, ‘no faut semed’ (l 1551); they talk a bit more then she kisses him for the second time and leaves the room.

The narration returns to the hunt, precisely to the moment when Bertilak dismounts his horse with a sword in hand and is attacked by the boar in the middle of a river. The lord strikes him in the neck and the dogs kill him; victory is celebrated by shouts and blows by the hunters and by the howling of the dogs themselves. Then, ‘a wyȝe þat watz wys vpon wodcraftez’ (l 1605) starts dissecting the boar, starting by the head that is later on brought in triumph before Bertilak.

The peculiarity of this hunting scene is the recurrence of terms referring to strength, madness and boldness; Bertilak is defined as a ‘bolde’ man (l 1465) while the adjectives used for describing the boar relates to wilderness and madness such as ‘vncely swyn’ (l 1562), which can both means unfortunate and harmful,¹⁶⁵ ‘breme and braynwod’ (l 1580). The beheading of the animal at l. 1607 ‘Fyrst he hewes of his hed and on hiȝe setteȝ’ echoes the one of the hinds and does at line 1353 ‘Boȝe þe hede and þe hals þay when of þenne’ and both represent a curious choice by the Gawain-poet. In both cases it is not Bertilak the one who does the breaking and the fact that the author decides to report just the beheading of the boar, contrary to the much longer and detailed scene of breaking of the hinds, might have a precise symbolic reason that will be discussed later.

The boar is a very important animal in medieval Celtic culture, especially related to the figure of the hero as it symbolizes strength, fierceness, and braveness. An example of this connection between the boar and the hero can be found in the tale of *Culhwch*

¹⁶⁵ “unsēlf” in Middle English Dictionary, https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED49676/track?counter=1&search_id=62861810

ac Olwen, a particularly important text belonging to the Celtic tradition, more specifically to the Welsh one, found in two manuscripts and included by Lady Charlotte Guest in her first edition of the *Mabinogion*. This tale revolves around the quests king Arthur's cousin, Culhwch, has to do in order to marry the daughter of the giant Ysbaddaden, Olwen. The giant indeed asks him to obtain a long list of items, not only difficult to find per se but also that need the possession of further things in order to be retrieved. For example one of the tasks revolves around the boar Twrch Trwyth that can be hunted with the help the dog Drudwyn, who can be tamed only by the hunter Mabon,¹⁶⁶ who has disappeared long time before; they will also need a specific horse Gwyn Dun-mane two dogs Aned and Aethlem, that can be led only by the huntsman Cyledr, the sword of Gwrnach the Giant, and so on; the quest is potentially endless.

The peculiarity of *Culhwch ac Olwen* is the link that binds together the objects Ysbaddaden requires; they all revolve around the concept of masculinity and strength, in particular via the symbol of the beard. As emphasized by Sarah Sheehan in her article *Giants, Boar-hunts, and Barbering: Masculinity in "Culhwch ac Olwen"*, "in medieval Celtic literature, beards – aside from the whiskers of loathly ladies – are the preserve of male characters. Beards were a sign of adult masculinity in medieval Wales: at least one medieval Welsh legal text links adult male status with having a beard".¹⁶⁷ Culhwch himself undergoes a sort of coming-of-age ceremony related to the hair, since king Arthur trims his hair. From that moment on, Culhwch stop being referred to as *mab*, 'boy' and starts being called *unben*, 'chieftain'.¹⁶⁸

Two of the items Ysbaddaden requests are particularly interesting for this interpretation and for a confront with the hunting scene of *Sir Gawain and the Green*

¹⁶⁶ It is interesting to note that in order to find him, the group of knights ask a number of animals, one older than the other, until they find the one that is ancient enough to know what happened to him. The second animal they consult is the Stag of Rhedynfre, older than the Ouzel of Cilgwri but younger than the Owl of Cwm Cawlwyd, the Eagle of Gwernabwy and the Salmon of Llyn Llyw, the last animal who guides them to Mabon.

¹⁶⁷ SHEEHAN 2005, 4. The connection between beard and masculinity can be found also in the Norse tradition, for example in the *Brennu-Njáls saga* it is reported how Njáll is disrespected by the others for his incapability of growing a proper beard.

¹⁶⁸ SHEEHAN 2005, 5-6.

Knight: the tusk from the chief boar Ysgithyrwyn and the comb and shears stuck behind the ears of the prince boar Twrch Trwyth.

The boar appears many times in the text, not only via the two opponents but also more indirectly: for instance, the name of the protagonist “is generally thought to mean ‘slender pigling,’ although the text clearly perceives the names meaning as ‘pigsty’ or ‘pig-run.’”¹⁶⁹ and moreover, the term used for the etymology is *hwch*, and not the more common *moch*. Only Culhwch and Twrch Trwyth are defined as ‘hwch’, linking the two characters together and at the same time separating them from the other types of porcines found in the text. Boars get nominated also in other occasion, such as when the knights go challenging the giant Dillus the Bearded and find him singeing a wild boar.

The first boar to be hunted is the chief boar Ysgithyrwyn; the hunt itself is quite short and less detailed than the second and it merely consists of Cyledyr the Wild – a huntsman Arthur found specifically for this task – splitting its head open with an axe while riding king Arthur’s horse, in order to retrieve its tusk. The dynamic of the killing recalls the one of the giant Dillus because both get slain by an axe on the head and both need to be alive while the item is collected – a tusk for Ysgithyrwyn and the beard for Dillus.

The second hunt, for the boar Twrch Trwyth is much longer and difficult, both for his resistance and evilness.¹⁷⁰ At first, they fight for nine days and nine nights devastating the province of Ireland, Arthur sends some men to him in hope of a dialogue but to no avail, once he returns to Wales, they succeed in wounding him with a spear and allure him in the open attacking his comrades. They drown him in the Severn and Cyledyr the Wild collects the shears from between his ears. Twrch manages anyway to escape to Cornwall, where the knights finally take the comb. The boar does not get killed but flees away in the sea, chased by the two dogs Aned and Aethlem and they disappear forever.

¹⁶⁹ SHEEHAN 2005, 12.

¹⁷⁰ He is not only evil but apparently also poisonous because the knight that gets into contact with its foam becomes permanently ill.

Some themes connect these hunts to the one depicted in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, like the fact that both Twrch and the boar are cornered between the knights and a river and the insistence of details on the power and evilness of the animal.¹⁷¹

The boar is less likely to appear in the bestiaries than other animals, such as the eagle or the deer, so a restrict number of texts offers description of it. When this animal is mentioned, its main attributes are strength or evilness. One of the first mentions is in the *Etymologies* of Isidore de Seville, where the etymology of the name of the boar is linked to its fierceness:

Aper a feritate vocatus, ablata F littera et subrogata P. Vnde et apud Graecos σύαγρος, id est ferus, dicitur. Omne enim, quod ferum est et inmite, abusive agreste vocamus.¹⁷²

The characteristics of wilderness and ferociousness continue to be attributed to the boar throughout the tradition, especially concerning the difficulties encountered while hunting the animal. Bartholomaeus Anglicus, in his *Liber de proprietatibus rerum*, for instance, adds the element of cruelty to the description, specifying that not only it is difficult to hunt the boar but also the animal, even when it is hit by spear, has the strength and the cruelty to wreak himself on his adversary with his tusks.

Thomas of Cantimpré's *Liber de natura rerum* agrees with his vision, especially regarding the tusk of the boar and the animal's resistance to wounds. Either the hunter strikes him for good the first time, either the hunt transforms into a battle that the human is not so sure to win:

Sed hoc satis mirabile est in dentibus, quod scilicet in viva bestia idem possunt quod ferrum, detracti vero mortue vim incisionis perdidisse probantur. Apro silvestri quidam truces homines seculi signari possunt, qui ad litteram nullam doctrinam bonorum operum recipiunt, sed semper sevi atque feroces, nigri, id est

¹⁷¹ Twrch Trwyth has a more personalized and detailed description of this, since king Arthur explains that he used to be a king and was transformed into a swine because of his wickedness. Twrch does not speak with the knights but his son does on his behalf and states that they do not want to do anything for Arthur, refusing to respect his role as a king. On the other hand, the boar of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is indeed defined as powerful and mad but its characterisation is still realistic.

¹⁷² "The wild boar derives its name from its ferocity, with the letter F removed and substituted by the P. Whence he is also named σύαγρος, that is "wild" in Greek. This is because everything that is wild and untamed, we call it 'of the country'." BARNEY, LEWIS, BEACH, BERGHOF 2006, 248.

turpes atque impii in gestibus iudicantur. Dentes recurvos in se habent, quia qui nocet alteri, primo se ipsum per mali propositum ledit in conscientia. Semipedales dentes habet, quia etsi ledunt corpus, animam in potestate non habent.[...] Verumtamen lassatum non cedit, nam subsistit in posterioribus et lassitudinem atrocitate rigida anceps dissimulat, duellum offerens venatori. Ferire tamen vel invadere hominem non presumit, nisi prius ictum ab illo acceperit. Itaque bene sibi homo caveat, quia nisi primo ictu pungentis cuspidis vulnus letale inter armum et laterales costas dedent, de vita periclitari poterit, nisi forte iuxta ad refugium arborem inveniat quam ascendat aut in loco humiliori reliqua terre planitie totis membris se premat; sustinebit tamen pedum illius proculcationem, quousque sic iacenti a proximo succurratur. [...] Aper cunctas bestias precedit auditu.¹⁷³

The interesting peculiarity of this text is the fact that it mentions two characteristics the boar shares with the tale of *Chulwch ac Olwen*, such as the fact that the tusk loses its ability to cut once the animal is dead – which recalls the fact that the tusk of Ysgithyrwyn must be taken mandatory before his death – and the fact that evil men can be defined as ‘wild boars’ – an element that echoes the punishment endured by Twrch Trwyth for his evil deeds.

Lastly, the *Master of Game* attributes to the boar highly dangerous nature, even if it points out once again how the boar is dangerous but the deer is fatal, mostly because

¹⁷³ “But this thing about the teeth is quite extraordinary, which is that in a live beast they are able to be used as a weapon, but having been removed from the boar they are proven to truly lose their power of cutting. Some cruel men of the age may be branded as wild boars, who receive literally no teaching of good works, but are always judged selfish and ferocious, black, that is, base and impious in their actions. They have crooked teeth in themselves, because he who injures another injures himself first in his conscience through the purpose of evil. He has half-foot teeth, because although they hurt the body, they have no control over the soul. [...] He does not give in when tired, for he stops and disguises his fatigue with a stiff fury, offering a duel to the hunter. However, he does not presume to strike or attack a man, unless he has first received a blow from him. And so a man should be careful, because unless he gives a fatal wound at the first blow of the spear's point between the arm and the side ribs, he may be in danger of his life, unless he may find a tree nearby which he can climb for refuge, or press himself with all his limbs in a lower place on the rest of the ground. He will, however, endure as long as he lies thus assisted by his neighbour.[...] The boar surpasses all beasts in listening.” CIPRIANI 2007, book 4.

of the fact that it kills in one strike, unlike other animals such as lions, which instead take more than one blow.

And ther nys neither lyon ne leoparde that sleeth a man at oo
stroke as þe boor dooþ, for þei must scle with rasyng of her clees
and þorgh byteng but þe wilde boor sleep a man at oo stroke as
þoo it were with a knyffe¹⁷⁴

The text goes on lingering on the hearing ability of the boar, already mentioned by Thomas of Cantimpré, and the shriek it emits while dying:

A boor hereth wondire wel and cleerly [...]Whan he may no
lenger defende hym self, ther ben fewe boores that ne playnmen
hem and cryen whan þei be ouyrcome to þe deef.¹⁷⁵

This element in particular, is present in the scene of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in the passage where Bertilak strikes the boar in the neck, which “zarrande hym zelde” (l. 1596). This detail does not seem to be irrelevant and scholars have debated on its meaning; Kaitsuka for example, reports the opinion of Anne Rooney according to whom “[the] description resembles the style of the English hunting manuals in terms of its concentration on sound and its scarcity of visual details”.¹⁷⁶ He also emphasizes how the fact that the author lingers on the painful howl of the dying boar shift the focus from the hunters, or Bertilak who is the one who struck him, to the animal, once again encouraging to feel sympathy for him.

The breaking of the prey is less detailed than the hinds’ scene, and once again Bertilak is not the one entrusted with this task; the scene instead concentrates upon the detail of the head of the boar that gets cut off and put on a spear and brought before the lord in triumph. To this beheading, described in l. 1607 “he hewes of his hed” is given more relevance than the one of the first day, “boþe þe hede and þe hals þay hwen of þenne” (l. 1353), and it is the trophy Gawain gets, unlike the first day when he is gifted the venison of the prey. The head does not seem to be a harbinger of the destiny of the

¹⁷⁴ “And there is neither lion nor leopard that slayeth a man at one stroke as a boar doth, for they mostly kill with their claws and through biting, but the wild boar slayeth a man with one stroke as with a knife” BAILLIE-GROHMAN, W. A., F. 1904, 27.

¹⁷⁵ BAILLIE-GROHMAN, W. A., F. 190, 29.

¹⁷⁶ KAITSUKA 2018, 364.

knight, in fact he simply praises the ability of the lord once he is given the gift and his imminent future is never linked to the head of the beast. J. D. Burnley in the article *The Hunting Scenes in 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'* suggests a parallelism between the duel of Bertilak and the boar, with its consequent beheading, and the duel between king Arthur and the giant of Mount St Michael in the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, at the end of which the giant's head is cut off and taken away as proof of the victory. The act of cutting the head and placing it on a spear is not a gesture which can be ascribed to a courtly behaviour and Burnley proposed two different interpretations for it. The first is that it serves the purpose of suggesting the mysterious and bewitched nature of the lord, who acts as Bertilak but also shares the role of the Green Knight, the other instead states that beheading is bestowed “upon adversaries who do not deserve human sympathy: oppressors of Christian people, pagan and Saracen leaders, treacherous felons, monsters or giants”; in this way, the “conflict with a formidable and wicked antagonist whose destruction represents not merely a considerable effort of fortitude and courage, but a triumph of good over evil”.¹⁷⁷ This theory presents a number of problems, starting from the fact that the text does not offer cues for identifying the boar as a demonic creature, even if the animal is described as mad or fierce, its characteristics are still realistic; it is furthermore hard to attribute a specific negative connotation to the boar when in the third day there is a fox, an animal much more suitable for the role. It is possible then that the choice to emphasize the beheading of the boar serves the same purpose of the breaking of the hinds: to detach the two hunting scenes from the typical courtly dynamic they normally would go with, like the showing off of the ability of the hunter to slaughter the prey.

About the beheading of the boar, it is interesting also to explore the reaction of Gawain to the gift. It is nonetheless peculiar how the knight does not show any type of emotion while being gifted the head, nor he creates a parallelism between the condition of the boar and his imminent future. Instead, he praises the ability of Bertilak in hunting such a huge prey and hustles to give his share in the Exchange of Winnings. Although Gawain does not openly respond to the sight of the beheaded boar, this does not imply that the text lacks any indication of the knight's reaction; soon after the banquet Gawain

¹⁷⁷ BURNLEY 1973, 8.

approaches the lord and asks him the permission to leave the following day, a proposal Bertilak declines for he wants to test Gawain for the third and last time, as he himself proclaims. In saying so, he also adds a way of saying, “Þe lur may mon lach when-so mon lykez”¹⁷⁸ (l. 1682), whose choice of words does not appear to be casual. The term *lur*, a variation of the noun *lire*, describes the loss of a thing, but also destruction, death, spiritual loss or harm.¹⁷⁹

The relationship between the boar and the behaviour of Gawain has divided scholars once again. The seduction scene is similar for structure to the hunting one, in both cases the action starts the moment the prey – whether it is the boar or Gawain – is directly attacked and answer strongly; it is not by chance indeed that the author does not report the dialogue between the two until the lady openly doubts the true nature of the knight, obliging him to answer without eluding her. Even if scholars agree that the dialogue between the lady and Gawain is more direct than the previous day, there is not a unique way of interpreting it, given that Gawain behaves like the boar and avoids the confrontation until he is directly attacked but at the same time, he lacks the fierceness that characterises the boar; the author himself defines his defence as “fayr” (l. 1551); the lady, on the other hand, is the one depicting a more aggressive and boar-like behaviour. Both the lady and the knight then can be interpreted as the boar of the seduction scene, given that they share with it some of its characteristics.

¹⁷⁸ “The woe one may win whenever one wishes” TOLKIEN 2006, 67.

¹⁷⁹ “lire” in Middle English Compendium <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED25723/track?counter=1>

3.7 – *Third day of hunt*

The second and the third day of hunting are separated by the brief scene of the banquet, during which Bertilak refuses to let Gawain leave and justifies himself saying “I haf fraysted þe twys, and faythful I fynde þe./Now ‘Þrid tyme þrowe best’ þenk on þe morne” (ll 1679-80) and the knight accepts to stay for another day, reassured that he will arrive to the Green Chapel at the dawn of the New Year. The third day is dominated by a very long seduction scene, 161 lines, in the middle of a much smaller hunting scene, respectively of 41 and 28 lines. The day starts in the same way of the other two but this time the author emphasizes the beauty of the day, defined as “miry” (l. 1691) and “clere” (l. 1747); the dogs are unleashed and immediately one of them tracks the animal they are going to hunt. One of the peculiarities of the prey of the third day is that, unlike the other two, this beast is immediately presented with a definite article, “þe fox” (l. 1699). The sight of the animal is not very welcomed by the hunters, who react angrily “wre3ande” and “with a wroth noyse” (l. 1706). The fox flees in the forest, is attacked by “þre þrat al graye” (ll. 1713-14) but succeeds in avoiding them “with alle þe wo on lyue” (l. 1717). The hunters keep insulting the animal with “3arande speche” (l. 1724) and the fox is “þreted and ofte þef called” (l. 1725).

While the hunting continues, the narration moves to Gawain’s chamber, where the man is sleeping, unlike the lady who gets up for visiting him. She is described as dressed “in a mery mantyle, mete to þe erþe” (l. 1736) while she enters his room and opens the curtains, waking the man up. Gawain hears her but does not react immediately, “in mornyng of mony þro þo3tes” (l. 1751); she then kisses him and her sight alleviates partially his worries. They talk for a while, until she starts pressing him once again to the point where he either refuses her with offence or accept her offer, neither of which options suits the knight. Gawain nonetheless refuses her politely but she shames him, because he does not love her, and claims to accept that behaviour only if the knight already has a lover, which Gawain denies. She kisses him for the second time as a goodbye then and before leaving, asks him for a parting gift. She proposes his glove but he defines it as beneath her honour and regrets not having with him something worthy of her. She then offers him a ring but he has nothing to give her back of the same worth, so he refuses once again; she unclasps the girdle around her waist,

described as “with grene sylke and with golde shaped” (l. 1832), and proposes it to him. Gawain again says no but she insists, claiming that he must not consider it as of low value “for quat gome so is gorde with þis grene lace,/while he hit hade hemely halced aboute,/þer is no habel vnder heuen tohewe hym þat myzt,/ for he myzt not be slayn for slyzt vpon erþe” (ll. 1847-50); this characteristic makes indeed Gawain falter and in the end he accepts it, swearing not to reveal anything to her husband as per her request. She kisses him for the third time and leaves him. Gawain then goes privately to the chapel and confesses to the priest, asking for forgiveness. Then he entertains himself with the ladies of the castle joyously.

The scene shifts to the hunting field, where the fox is still running away, the lord throws at him his ‘bryzt bronde’ (l. 1901), scaring him and allowing one of the dogs to reach for him and bite. The other hunters arrive and praises the catch with screams and blows of the horns and this “rich rurd þat þer watz rayسد for Renaude saule with lote” (l. 1916).

The breaking scene is no longer than four lines and it has scarcely any detail, it is just stated that the dogs get rewarded, even if it seems like they just get petted, and the hunters skin the fox. They hurry home where the lord finds Gawain, clad in a blue cloak, waiting for him; the knight meets him and claims he is going to be the first that day to fulfil the deal, then he kisses the lord thrice. Bertilak is pleasantly impressed by them and sorrowfully states that his winning of the day is not worthy enough, being that it is just a mere fox coat. Gawain on the contrary accepts it and the lord then narrates him how he hunted it.

The fox has always been present in the European literature, with both positive and negative characteristics, as shown by famous examples such as Aesop. During medieval time, the Christian doctrine chose the fox as the symbol the Devil, defining every characteristic of the animal as negative. This type of approach impacted not only the bestiaries but almost every type of literature. For example Isidore of Seville in his *Etymologies* presents the fox as:

Vulpes dicta, quasi volupes. Est enim volubilis pedibus, et numquam rectis itineribus, sed tortuosis anfractibus currit, fraudulentum animal insidiisque decipiens. Nam dum nun

habuerit escam, fingit mortem, sicque descendentes quasi ad
cadaver aves rapit et devorat.¹⁸⁰

The peculiar way the fox runs can be found also in the *Physiologus* of bishop Theobald, where it is also added how the fox, in order to escape, is capable of biting off its own foot, an element which is then connected with the Gospel that advice men that is preferable to enter Heaven without a hand than going to Hell with an intact body. It is one of the few examples of the fox being presented as a neutral, if not positive, figure.

The returning characteristics of the fox seem then to be the cunning nature, the tricky way of hunting pretending to be dead and the fact that it does not walk in a straight line.

The *Bestiary* of Philippe de Thaon draws a clear parallel between the behaviour of the fox and the one of the Devil:

Gupilz est mult livrié e forment vezié [...]LI gupilz signefie
Diable en ceste vie; A gent en carn vivant demustre mort
semblant,Tant que en mal sunt entré, en sa buche enferré, Dunc
les prent en eslure, si's ocit e desvure,Si cum li gupilz fait li oisel
quant l'a atrait.[...] E Erode en verté à gupil fud esmé.¹⁸¹

In the *Liber de proprietatibus rerum*, Bartholomaeus Anglicus along with the same characteristics of the other bestiaries adds some new information about the fox, such as the explanation of why the animal does not walk in a straight line, describing its right legs as shorter than the other two, but also the interesting fact that the fox and the hart are friends. This detail is indeed peculiar because in the other bestiaries it is mentioned how the stag is frightened by the voice of fox – maybe because it resembles the one of the dog.

¹⁸⁰ “Foxes are so named as if the word was ‘volupes’. This happens because they are shifty on their feet and never follow a straight path but hurry along tortuous twisting, it is a deceitful animal that deceives with tricks. In fact, whenever it has no food it pretends to be dead, and so it snatches and devours the birds that descend to its apparent corpse.” BARNEY, LEWIS, BEACH, BERGHOF 2006, 253.

¹⁸¹ “The fox is very sly and very cunning [...]The fox signifies the Devil in this life; to people living in the flesh he shows semblance of being dead, till they are entered into evil, caught in his mouth, then he takes them by a jump, and slays and devours them, as the fox does the bird when he has allured it.[...] and Herod in truth was likened to the fox.” WRIGHT 1841, 34.

The only positive of the fox is its usefulness in the field of medicine, especially for illnesses of the eyes and ears.

The *Master of Game* concentrates more on how to hunt a fox stating that

With gret payne he wil leeeue (sic) a couert whan he is þerinne
he takeþ not playn contre for he tresteth not on his rennyng
neþere in his defence for he is to feble and ȝif he do it shal be by
verey strenght of men and houndes.[...] The fox ne pleyneþ hym
nat whan men slee hym but euere he defendeth hym at his pouer
þe while he may lyve.¹⁸²

In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* the fox does not present so many negative attributes, saves for the negative reaction the hunters have at his sight and the two times he gets called “Reynard”¹⁸³ (ll. 1728, 1892) the approach towards him is the one towards an animal and not the allegory of the evil.

The third day is the one scholars have focused more on, because of the peculiarity of the animal chased but also because of the narrative structure. As pointed out by Kaitsuka, “the treatment of foxhunts in medieval romance is less frequent than other types of hunt. The only contemporary reference to foxhunting, in fact, is in *Ferumbras*, the Middle English translation of the Charlemagne romance. [...] Foxhunting is fairly rare in the realm of literature, but it was quite usual in medieval courtly life.”; this peculiarity led scholars to believe that the author wanted to draw a parallelism between the fox and Gawain, even if this connection might not be as immediate as it seems.

What characterizes mostly the fox of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is the personal attributes the author gives the animal, starting from a definite article that detaches him since the start from the other two preys hunted, that on the other hand are introduced by an indefinite. This emphasis is shown also in the choice of having the fox as the subject of the phrases, even at the cost of them being passive, as Kaitsuka points out.

¹⁸² “And he will scarcely leave a covert when he is therein, he taketh not to the plain country for he trusteth not in his running neither in his defence, for he is too feeble, and if he does, it is because he is (forced to) by the strenght of men and hounds.[...] The fox does not complain when men slay him, but he defends himself with all his power while he is alive.” BAILLIE-GROHMAN, W. A., F. 1904, 36-7.

¹⁸³ Reynard is the medieval allegorical figure for human deception and fraud, vastly known in Europe, mostly because of the presence of the Roman de Renart, literary cycle of medieval allegorical fables. The reference to this name link the fox of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to the traditional allegorical fox, whose connotations are negative.

It still must be noted how, even if the fox is the subject, he holds no power over the situation, totally dominated by the hunters, the choice of the author serves not to give him any agency but for the purpose of shifting the focus on the fox, suggesting sympathy for the animal. It is opinion of Kaitsuka that the intent of the author is expressed also through another literal means, namely the use of what he identifies as an ethical dative at the line 1905 “And worried me þis wyly with a wroth noyse”. Given that it would be a one-time occurrence in the entire poem, this hypothesis presents some critical issues, and it is possible that more than an ethical dative, the ‘me’ is a contraction of the pronoun ‘men’. Kaitsuka goes on listing also the fact that the joyous cry the hunters shout once the animal is killed is considered also as a requiem for his soul. All these things put together, according to him, “show that the quarry—the deer, boar, and fox—are not only the target of the hunters, but also the goal of our sympathy”.¹⁸⁴ Burnley in his article agrees with this vision, stating that “we concentrate on the fox and are invited to sympathize with him, since he is the only animal given human emotions”.¹⁸⁵ This opinion is not shared by W. R. J. Barron, who on the other hand considers “the third day as a deliberate breach of the pattern established on the firsts two, so that the contrast which had been in the lady's disfavour becomes a similarity wholly to Gawain's discredit”.¹⁸⁶

Another difference in the third hunt is noted by Avril Henry who reports how “the kill was mentioned immediately after the temptation, but in the perfect tense, suggesting the kill occurred during instead of after it: coinciding in fact with Gawain's acceptance of the talisman”.¹⁸⁷ This coincidence links even more tightly the two scenes and gives a moral meaning to the choice made by the knight. The parallelism is also supported by the fact that both the animal and Gawain, essentially, condemn themselves at the moment when they think they are safe, the fox jumps in front of the dogs in order to escape the blade of Bertilak and Gawain, for avoiding dying beheaded accepts the girdle offered, which will then define his failure.

¹⁸⁴ KAITSUKA 2018, 370.

¹⁸⁵ BURNLEY 1973, 3.

¹⁸⁶ BARRON 1973, 15.

¹⁸⁷ HENRY 1976, 193.

The breaking scene is different from the other two as well, especially because it lacks the ritual beheading and the only winning retrieved is the fur of the animal. It is offered nonetheless to Gawain by the lord but, confronting it with the three passionate kisses the knight gives him, Bertilak deplores its low value. The term for the fur, ‘cote’, appears also while Gawain is dressing up in order to reach the Green Chapel, at line 1016 “His cote with þe consyaunce of þe clere werkez”; this reference does not seem to be casual, especially because immediately after mentioning the cote, the author alludes to the pentacle, even if indirectly. The symbol of the shield of the knight indicates the five virtues of the knight and, according to Avril Henry “Gawain loses the right to wear the symbol of unflawed perfection precisely because he has feared for his skin and betrayed himself”.¹⁸⁸ Another ironic aspect linked to the fur is the fact that Bertilak gives it to Gawain who instead offers him three kisses, while he should reveal he has been gifted the magic girdle.¹⁸⁹

Like the other two days Gawain depicts a behaviour closer to the one of the specific animals than to the symbology it provides, therefore more than being cunning, the knight appears terrified at the prospect of dying and willing to do whatever it takes in order to survive. As specified by Burnley, the third day the identification between animal and knight is not immediate, given that “the deviousness of the lady is matched by the cunning of the fox, but identification is not so simple since anxiety is felt both for the hero and for the fox as a result of the characterization of the latter”.¹⁹⁰ It is possible to say that the lady resembles the characteristics of the medieval conception of the fox, while the knight shares similarities with “þe fox” that is being chased. An interesting parallel is then offered by Iris Ralph in her article “*An animal studies and ecocritical reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*” where she points out how scholars tend to concentrate on the similarities Gawain and the fox share without noticing that “The bushy red-bearded crafty Bertilak of Hautdesert (“Brode [...] watz his berde, and all beuer-hwed”) (Broad was his beard and reddish-brown in color) (line

¹⁸⁸ HENRY 1976, 194.

¹⁸⁹ It is worth noting also how it is the first time when the asymmetry in the value of the gifts the two men exchange does not see Bertilak as the one with the more valuable one.

¹⁹⁰ BURNLEY 1973, 9.

845) evokes the figural fox (and the common species of English fox [*Vulpes vulpes*], commonly called the “red fox” because of its characteristic reddish coloured fur).¹⁹¹

3.8 – *Three days together*

The general interpretation of the three days is that, as Avril Henry writes, “there is a steady diminution in the scale of the sport, the ceremony of its performance, the degree of social involvement in its success, and the quality of benefit derived from it”.¹⁹² This narrowness can also be found in the chamber dynamic, because the lady each day doubts the nature of the knight every time in a more specific way, the first day she questions his chivalric nature, on the second she refers to the fact that he seems to have forgotten what she taught him the day before and lastly, on the third day she openly accuses him of not loving her, effectively narrowing their relationship from a social to an intimate one.

It is not easy to draw conclusions on the reason why the Gawain-poet put these hunting and seduction scenes in the third *fytt* of the poem, mostly because of the fact that it is difficult for scholars to find an interpretation that fit all the three days. As Gerald Morgan summed up perfectly in the article *The action of hunting and bedroom scenes in ‘Sir Gawain and the Green Knight’*, “if one of the hunts is symbolically significant, all three are likely to be symbolically significant”¹⁹³ and narratively and structurally these scenes are connected.

There are references to the literal and cultural traditions of the Celtic medieval Britain but it is apparent that the confrontation integrates the choice but does not fully explain it; the hunting scene in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are too realistic to be just symbolic representation of medieval values and they need an interpretation that goes beyond the thematic aspect the animals hunted present. If the perspective of the medieval time is what to go by, the fox should be a very negative figure, but that would

¹⁹¹ RALPH 2017, 438-9.

¹⁹² HENRY 1976, 188.

¹⁹³ MORGAN 1987, 212.

not explain why in the text the animal is presented in a neutral light, to the point that the author says the choir of the hunters is a requiem for his soul.

An interesting perspective that tries to bind together the three days and that detaches from the typical tendency of studies on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to concentrate on just the third day, is the article *Gawain's measure and the significance of the three days of hunt in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* of Peter McClure. In this article the author says that instead Gawain's behaviour should not be confronted to the one of each animal every day, but on the other hand it should be contraposed, in this perspective, the animal depicts the wrong type of behaviour and the knight the correct one. According to McClure, the poem of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a test for Gawain, given that he is the champion of Camelot,¹⁹⁴ that happens through a number of games,¹⁹⁵ each of which concentrates on a specific aspect: "the Exchange of Winnings Game is essentially (though by no means only) a test of Gawain's truth to his word [...] But the Beheading Game and the Lady's *layk of luf*, while they also test much else besides, are ostensibly trials of his courage and his courtesy to women, both of which appear to be conceived in this poem as mean virtues".¹⁹⁶ They serve to evaluate the ability of the knight to maintain what McClure calls *measure*, the mean virtue, the self-control typically associated with courtly behaviour.

According to this interpretation the first two animals represent respectively the defect and the excess of this virtue and their wrong behaviours contrast with the correct ones of the knight; the first day is dominated by the hind, symbol of a lack of *measure* and of fear, the second is centred on the boar, the excess of the virtue and symbol of anger, the third day is the one where Gawain fails to depict a correct behaviour and for this reason there is a strong connection between the action of the animal and his.

Fear and anger return throughout the poem more than once: according to McClure the Green Knight toys with his ability to rouse fear and anger at the court of Camelot, at

¹⁹⁴ As the Green Knight clearly states, the challenge was plotted by Morgan in order to scare Guinevere to death and to test the court all together, there is no personal grudge between Gawain and Bertilak and the lord, after explaining him the ordeal, indeed offers the knight to return to his castle in order to celebrate the New Year and to reconcile with the lady.

¹⁹⁵ The terms used for referring to both the Beheading Game and the hunt revolve around the concept of "game", the Beheading is a 'gomen' (l. 274, 282), the hunt is a 'laykez' (l. 1178).

¹⁹⁶ McCLURE 1973, 376.

first by scaring the knights then by provoking them, moreover “the terms of the game he proposes forbid his opponent either to ‘flee’ or to ‘assaile’ in order to save his life, and in so doing define what sort of courage is demanded from the Round Table’s champion”,¹⁹⁷ preventing the knight to express fear or anger; during the second part of the Beheading Game, Gawain seems to be tested on his endurance of these two sentiments. His arrival at the Green Chapel is welcomed by a noise “as one vpon a gryndelston hade grounden a syþe” (l. 2204) that McClure interprets a possible echo of the noise that scares the animal at the start of each hunt, and the servant that accompanied him there proposes him to “let þe gome one,/ and gotz away sum oþer gate” (ll. 2118-9), tempting him to surrender to fear and escape. The knight resists the temptation and persevere, encountering the Green Knight who compliments his loyalty to the deal and prepares to strike him. The fact that Gawain “schränke a lytel with þe schulderes for þe scharp yrne” (l. 2267) tends to be connected with the line of the third day of hunt “And he schunt for þe scharp, and schulde haf arered” (l. 1902), linking together the behaviour of Gawain with the one of the fox but according to McClure, his flinching is the result of simple fear, and therefore links him more the behaviour of the deer than that of the fox”. The test for anger comes immediately after, when the Green Knight hesitates at striking once again and Gawain, “ful gryndelly with greme” (l. 2299) invites him to take action instead of waiting.

The third strike is the one that effectively harms the knight, opening a small wound on his neck and it serves as a punishment for the girdle. It is an interesting fact that Gawain is not punished for the girdle per se, because the Beheading Game does not forbid deception and the Green Knight himself must rely on Morgan’s magic in order to survive and disguise himself; the fault of Gawain is in the fact that he conceals it from the lord and while they are exchanging the winnings of the day, he merely offers him three kisses.

The act of accepting the girdle “produce[s] a concatenation of failings symbolised respectively by the three animals in the order in which they are hunted - deer, boar, and fox”,¹⁹⁸ because it is an act of cowardice – the deer – it implies a romantic

¹⁹⁷ McCLURE 1973, 381.

¹⁹⁸ McCLURE 1973, 385-6.

involvement with the lady¹⁹⁹ the boar – and lastly, it obliges him to lie to the lord – the fox. McClure concludes observing how the Green Knight, due to the fact that Gawain did not act with adulterous intention but merely with cowardice to save his life, absolves him, stating that “At þe þrid þou fayled þore/ and þerfor þat tappe ta þe” (ll. 2355-6). The ultimate act of *mesure*, meaning of justice tempered with mercy, comes then from the character that behaved the most outrageously.

The theory proposed by McClure offers an interesting change in perspective, with the three animals considered as counterparts to Gawain. However, it does not fully explain the dynamics of the third day, when the knight and the fox seem to behave similarly.

For this reason, it might be noteworthy to propose a theory that diverge from the tendency of studies to connect just Gawain to the animals chased. Even if this hypothesis is rarely, if never, discussed among scholars, it is possible to postulate the possibility that the three animals and their behaviour are not meant to be attributed to Gawain alone but also to two other characters that depict a similar attitude. As previously shown, the knight shares many characteristics with the fox, to the point that the death of the animal coincides with the acceptance of the girdle, his ‘cote’ is gifted to Gawain and it substitutes the pentacle the day he goes to the Green Chapel.

It is possible to consider then that, while Gawain shares similarities with the fox, the parallelism with the two other animals is reserved for other characters. King Arthur, for instance, is depicted at the beginning of the poem as a king of “þonge blod and his brayn wylde” (l. 89), an element insisted upon also by other adjectives attributed to the king such as “stif”²⁰⁰ (l. 106) and “kene” (l. 322). The sudden arrival of the Green Knight ruins the joyful mood of the king that not only observes the entrance of the uninvited knight into his hall but is also indirectly insulted by him. The Green Knight indeed addresses the court of Camelot using the term ‘gyng’, “a northern dialect word of Scandinavian origin [...] that, according to the OED (s. v. ging), could be used “in depreciatory sense: a crew, rabble”.”²⁰¹ He then openly challenges the king, stating

¹⁹⁹ The exchange of gifts, especially of rings, is typical of the Germanic tradition for lovers.

²⁰⁰ The Middle English Dictionary translates it as “unflinching, resolute, bold, valiant; also, proud” https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED42913/track?counter=1&search_id=67927830.

²⁰¹ VOLKONSKAYA 2013, 151.

that if he is “so bold as alle burnez tellen”²⁰² (l. 273) he is going to play the game he proposed. Arthur reacts angrily to his words, to the point that “He wex as wroth as wynde” (l. 320), and grips the axe, ready to behead the Green Knight. It is possible to connect his behaviour with the one of the boar, which gets incredibly aggressive only after it is struck by spears. The two also share adjectives describing their sturdiness and boldness. In the same way the boar attacks directly Bertilak, king Arthur accepts the challenge after the insinuations and the sarcastic laugh of the Green Knight, and is about to decapitate him, was not for Gawain that stops him offering himself in his stead.

Continuing this parallelism between other figures than Gawain and the animals, it is useful to return to the detail of the first day when only female animals are hunted. This detail is not very deepened in the studies, mostly due to the fact that the poem itself justifies this choice, but it is nonetheless interesting to advance a hypothesis that binds together the female nature of the deer and the only female character – apart from the lady Bertilak and the old lady of the castle – that appears: queen Guinevere. Avril Henry cites her at the end of her article *Temptation and Hunt in "Sir Gawain And The Green Knight"*, emphasizing how the challenge is derived from the hatred that Morgan proves against her. Morgan, defined by the Green Knight as “Morgne la Faye” and “Morgne þe goddess” (ll. 2444, 2450), is justified in a way according the scholar by the fact that the other woman stands in the place that should be reserved for her, was not for the fact that Arthur, an illegitimate son, took the throne.²⁰³ The entire plot of the poem then has been prepared by Morgan with the sole purpose to “haf greued Gaynour and gart hir to dyȝe/with glopnyng of þat ilke gome þat gostlych speked/ with his hede in his honed before þe hyȝe table” (ll. 2461-3).²⁰⁴

Guinevere appears at the beginning of the poem during the celebration of Christmas, described as ‘þe comlokest’ (l. 81) and more than her actions, it is her spatial collocation in Camelot that appears to be relevant. She is the one Gawain sits next to and it is towards her that the Green Knight orientates the detached head before taking

²⁰² The adjective ‘bold’ is the same that will be attributed later on in the text also to the boar.

²⁰³ HENRY 1976, 195.

²⁰⁴ “In hope Guinevere to hurt, that she in horror might die/aghast at that glamoury that gruesomely spake/with his head in its hand before the high table” TOLKIEN 2006, 91.

his leave. It is worth noting how the queen is not referred directly but simply as “þe derrest on þe dece”²⁰⁵ (l. 444) and her name disappears completely from the text to appear only at the end, when the Green Knight explains how Morgan has plotted against her; her name is cited only the first and the last time she is referred to, in all the other occasions, she is addressed through periphrasis. Guinevere is connected to the concept of fear also through Arthur’s words, when he tries to console her after the beheading saying “dere dame, today demay yow neuer” (l. 470). The choice of the verb “demay” encourage this theory, given that the Oxford English Dictionary defines the verb “dismay” (demay is a variation of it) as “To deprive of moral courage at the prospect of peril or trouble; to appal or paralyze with fear or the feeling of being undone”.²⁰⁶

It is then possible to suggest that the deer might represent Guinevere, frightened to death, the boar might be Arthur, provoked by the Green Knight until he burst, and the fox could be Gawain, the one that loses its ‘cote’ – in the same way that Gawain loses the possibility of showing the pentacle once he gives in the temptation of the girdle.

Apart from the first part, the two monarchs never appears in the poem and so do the animals as soon as the hunting scenes are over, if one ignores the brief mention to the ‘cote’ wore by Gawain while preparing for the Green Chapel. Furthermore, there are almost no references in the Arthurian matter of comparison between the monarchs and animals in general, let alone specific ones such as Guinevere and the hind or Arthur and the boar. All these elements make difficult to prove correct the theory that the author had indeed the intention of creating a link between the afore mentioned figures and the preys. This hypothesis is based upon parallelisms between the behaviour of the characters and of the animals; king Arthur is induced to an impulsive behaviour like the boar, and it is explicitly stated that queen Guinevere is supposed to die in fear like the hinds and does – but it also tries to bind together the hunting scene and the entirety of the poem itself. Borrowing once again Tolkien’s thesis, the poem has a strong moral theme, expressed through the testing of Gawain’s moral and courteous abilities. As

²⁰⁵ It is interesting how Guinevere is strongly connected to the concept of beauty whereas Morgan, in her disguise as an old lady, is described as hideous, even if ‘heȝly honowred with hapelez aboute’ (l. 949).

²⁰⁶ “dismay” in Oxford English Dictionary
https://www.oed.com/dictionary/dismay_v1?tab=meaning_and_use.

emphasized by scholars and by the behaviour depicted by the characters, especially the Green Knight in the first part of the poem, the testing is not just for Gawain per se but also for the entire court of Camelot. Taking this theory for granted, it seems far from being impossible that its leading figures, namely the king and the queen, are involved in the testing. Their involvement is not direct, if not in the first part where the king speaks with the Green Knight and the queen assists to the beheading, but they seem to be present nonetheless. All three characters risk death during the poem, Guinevere out of fear, Arthur because he has not Gawain stepped in, he would have been beheaded within a year, and Gawain himself once he reaches the Green Chapel; that being said, it is possible to consider the result of the testing as a positive one, despite the anger and resentment Gawain expresses at the end: all the characters involved have avoided the fate of their corresponding prey, despite being put in a similar situation. To consolidate this theory, the court instead of punishing Gawain for his behaviour and the supposed failure of his quest, repurposes the girdle, changing it from a sign of dishonour to a sign of knighthood.

Conclusion

Once the various aspects of the poem have been analysed, it is possible to conclude that the work does not show strong influences from Celtic culture, even though it shares many elements with it, most of which can be found in the characters. However, while they present similarities, the characters from Celtic tradition, both Irish and Welsh, do not seem to offer prolific interpretative insights for the poem. An interesting element is that, aside from certain features, the characters in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* appear to have borrowed the supernatural aspect from Celtic tradition, as they are the main bearers of this element within the text, which, except for the Green Chapel, is set in highly realistic locations—so realistic that scholars have been able to identify which landscapes were described during Gawain’s journey. Even where the appearance of the location seems supernatural, as in the case of the castle of Hautdesert, which appears to Gawain after his prayer to the Virgin, the environment retains a realistic appearance. The event is contextualized within the Christian framework, losing its magical connotation and assuming that of a miracle — a situation quite different from Cúroi’s rotating castle.

A similar argument can be made regarding other cultural influences that were widespread during the time when the poem was composed, such as the Wild Hunt. While the peak of this folkloric phenomenon coincides with the period of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*’s composition, it does not seem possible to trace any similarities with the important hunting scene in the poem. Although both indeed address the theme of hunting, the scene described in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* defies any association with the Wild Hunt, both in themes and characterization, sharing only the sound element of the din as a point of contact.

A more in-depth analysis of the text reveals that analysing the allegorical elements present based on symbols found in medieval bestiaries is not appropriate. Additionally, comparing the poem with various texts from different traditions and characters from adjacent cultures highlights the element of realism as a peculiar

feature distinguishing between this text and the others examined. While the poem adopts widely symbols and metaphorical readings, the analysis shows a strong presence of realistic details both in environmental descriptions and in the actions performed in various scenes, which emerges as a unique characteristic of the text. This is mostly apparent in the hunting scene, described through realistic details and settings (the places, the actions, the animals), so that the symbolic narrative is developed on a vivid and accurate literal meaning.

The structure of the poem invites a close intertwining of the themes present in the hunting scene with those of the seduction scene, identified by Tolkien as the core of the entire composition. However, it is difficult to identify an interpretative key that can include all three days of hunting with their respective symbols in a satisfactory manner. It is therefore possible to hypothesize that the comparison attempted so far—between the knight's actions in the bedroom and the prey hunted in the forest—may not be the most accurate approach. Instead, one could consider broadening the scope to include the two rulers of Camelot in the parallel with the hunting prey.

In conclusion, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* presents, rather than genuine influences, an original reworking of some typical elements of various cultures, all of which are adjacent to the geography and culture of the composition's author. The author thus assembles various elements and suggestions and reworks them into an original composition, altering the connotation of some characteristics. Therefore, one cannot rely on the typical interpretation of the cultures examined to reinterpret, add new keys to, or propose new perspectives on the text.

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