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A matter of pride : a misplaced end quote in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

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Gawain and the
Green Knight

May 31, 1999

A MATTER OF PRIDE:
A Misplaced End Quote in Sir Gawain
and the Green Knight

by

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THESIS SIGNATURE SHEET

This thesis is accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Master of Arts.

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thank-you mom and dad

your love filled in the hole in my heart, and has continued to give me strength. i owe everything to you.

I also would like to thank Dr. Peter G. Beidler for being a positive and extremely helpful influence on this paper from its conception to its conclusion and without whom this paper would not have been written.

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I look directly at the text of *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight* and question the punctuation that modern editors and scholars have placed in this narrative poem. I contend that the end quote should be moved from the end of line 683 to the end of line 675. The majority of this speech does not belong to the court, but rather. Rather, it belongs to the narrator who is rebuking a young and powerful king who is unjustly and immaturely misusing his power and position. This speech is a direct criticism of Arthur and his prideful nature--an attack that has been thwarted by the misplacement of the end quote by modern editors. By moving this one piece of punctuation eight lines, both political and stylistic problems that have resulted from the mis-punctuation are solved and a stronger, more logical reading emerges.

Who punctuated the text of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*? While most modern readers of this narrative poem are familiar with the fact that all quotation marks have been supplied not by the original author but by modern editors and translators, they rarely think to question the punctuation that they read in the modern version. Students and scholars have accepted without reservation the ascription of this punctuation, focusing on the words of the text as punctuated by modern editors without thinking about the original, un-punctuated text itself. Much debate has arisen from the proper translations of this poem, with most editors explaining their justification for changing letters to replace obsolete characters or briefly commenting on why they translated particular words or phrases a certain way. Editors seem to have, however, few qualms about adding punctuation. Most do not even mention that they virtually add all of it, and, if they do mention it, they gloss over this fact. An example would be Norman Davis who tersely writes in his introduction, ". . . punctuation--which does not exist in the manuscript--is supplied."¹ This supplying of punctuation, in effect, has narrowed the line of vision for reader-scholars, forcing them to interpret the speeches of the characters as belonging only to those characters. The arbitrary quotation marks that editors have forced onto the text, while making it easier to read, have also contaminated the work. These simple curved marks on the printed page are symbols of difference, of division. The quotation marks have given particular characters voice while silencing others. This practice for adding quotation

marks might be acceptable if the editors have punctuated the text correctly.

Unfortunately, they have sometimes been wrong. Today, I want us to look directly at the text, a text that virtually all editors have mis-punctuated. The result is a serious problem of interpretation that makes a puzzling poem even more of an enigma. I am calling into question one particular passage in this poem, lines 672-83. I contend that the end quote should be moved from the end of line 683 to the end of line 675. By moving this one piece of punctuation eight lines, I believe, a stronger, more logical reading emerges. But let us first look at the way modern editors have punctuated this section of the text.

The passage comes relatively early in the poem. Sir Gawain has intervened for Arthur and has chopped off the head of the Green Knight, only to be told by the magical knight that in a year's time, he will have to put his own neck on the chopping block. The year is almost up and the Green Knight is getting ready for his journey. If we read the passage that I am contesting today as modern editors would have us read it, it is a scene where, as Sir Gawain leaves Arthur's court for his fateful appointment with destiny in the Green Chapel, members of the court react to his departure. They sigh and talk to one another about the dreadful journey that awaits the much-admired young knight. They are sorry for the misfortune that is taking Gawain away, and they praise him for his worthiness as a man who has no equal on earth as well as attack their king for his foolish judgment.

Printed below is the passage edited by Sir Israel Gollancz². I do want to make it very clear that *NOT ONE* edition that I have found in my research has placed the punctuation marks in any alternative spots. Everyone from W. R. J. Barron³, Theodore Banks⁴, Marie Borroff⁵, Burton Raffel⁶, J. A. Burrow⁷, C. A. Cawley⁸, James Rosenberg⁹, J. R. R. Tolkien¹⁰, William Vantuono¹¹, and R. A. Waldron¹²--to name a few--have mis-inserted the end quote, creating a near universal misrepresentation of the poem. Not one of these editors has questioned the arbitrary nature of the punctuation and all have continued to place the quotation marks of the passage I am about to read in the same position, giving the court a collective voice describing the situation of Sir Gawain:

Al *bat* sez *bat* semly syked *in* hert,
 & sayde *sofly* al same segges til oper,
 Carande for *bat* comly, ["]bi Kryst, hit is *scape*
 Pat *hou*, leude, schal be lost, *bat* art of lyf noble!
 To fynde hys fere vpon folde, *in* fayth, is not *eþe*;
 Warloker to haf wrost had more wyt bene,
 & haf dyst sonder dere a duk to haue worþed;
 A lowande leder of ledes *in* londe *hym* wel semes,
 & so had better haf ben *ben* britned to nozt,
 Hadet wyth an aluisch mon, for angardez pryde.
 Who knew euer any kyng such counsel to take,
 As knyztez *in* cauel[aci]ounz on cryst-masse
 gommez?["]

(672-83)

I believe that the majority of this speech does not belong to the court, but rather, that it belongs to the narrator who is interjecting very clearly and boldly an account of a young and powerful king who is unjustly and immaturely misusing his

power and position. It is a direct rebuke of Arthur and his prideful nature--an attack that has been thwarted by the misplacement of the end quote by modern editors.

I will first discuss the textual references to the king to see how the *Gawain*-poet describes Arthur so that we can see the implications of the Green Knight's challenge and the ramifications of this challenge on the court. Second, I will look at the first few lines of this poem to see how the *Gawain*-poet situates Arthur in history and how this situation affects the way we should read the narrator's commentary on the king's ruling behavior. Finally, I will suggest an alternative way to punctuate this speech, taking away most of the lines from the collective voice of the court and giving them instead to the vocal and condemning narrator; an alternative way that will make this section of the text not only coherent politically, but stylistically, as well.

First, then, let us look at the textual references to see how the *Gawain*-poet describes the powerful young king. To do so, we have to ask ourselves who exactly the king is in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. As readers, we have no knowledge of what he looks like--we do not know if he is short or tall, skinny or muscular, bearded or clean-shaven. Compared to the Green Knight and Sir Gawain, both of whom have long descriptive passages allotted to their distinctive "manly" features and dress, Arthur is a much more ambiguous figure. But while the *Gawain*-poet does not include references to the physical attributes of the king, Arthur's attitude and

ruling behavior are quite clearly shown. He is described as a man who is "sum-quat childgered," and who is "so joly of his joyfnes" (86) and who is more interested in watching tournaments that result in death than dealing with more serious matters of his kingdom. His "brayn wylde" and his "zonge blod" (89) control his thinking and judgment. His youth is directly associated with immaturity, the polar opposite of the mature decision-making ability of a seasoned and thoughtful king. He stands "stistles stif" (103) over his table. Like a little child who has been banished to the children's table at Thanksgiving dinner, Arthur refuses to eat until a story is told to him. This singular descriptive paragraph of Arthur is a direct condemnation of his immature ruling behavior.

The Green Knight, when he enters the Christmas dinner at Camelot, does everything he can to make sure that he will attack the pride of King Arthur. He does not observe the rules of medieval chivalric etiquette. He boldly and disrespectfully approaches the king on horseback, referring to Arthur as "gouvernour" (225) and the king's knights as "berdley chylde" (280), directly attacking the ruling authority of Arthur. The magical knight shows no respect for the young ruler. Indeed, his purpose in addressing the court is to embarrass Arthur and undermine his position as king. The Green Knight does not propose to fight against Arthur's "wayke" (282) knights. Rather, he wants to play a game, to make Arthur's feast a spectacle, placing the immature king's pride on display for all to see.

But who exactly is the Green Knight challenging in this perverse Christmas game? His challenge is made to the whole court--"any so hardy *in his hous*" (285)-- but on closer inspection, it becomes obvious that the Green Knight is, in fact, making a challenge to one man. The Green Knight wants to go blow-for-blow with a man who "be so bolde *in his blod, brayn in hys hede*" (286) which is reminiscent of the description of the immature Arthur as described by the narrator of this poem who, as I noted previously, described the king as observing "his *þonge blod & his brayn wylde*" (89). The Green Knight uses the same sort of phrasing that the narrator has previously used in the poem and both are direct indictments of the king. When Arthur and his knights remain silent and do not immediately accept his Christmas challenge, the Green Knight continues his verbal onslaught. The *Gawain*-poet, with a flare for the dramatic, has him clear his throat to make sure everyone in the court can understand him and thereby become a witness to his challenge. By calmly stating that the accomplishments of the round table have been "*Ouer-walt wyth a worde of on wyzes speche*" (314), he directly indicts Arthur and his prideful nature. The king, symbolically the head of the court and its system of rule, is being directly challenged by the Green Knight in a beheading game. Obviously, for this system to work there can be no doubt of the sovereignty of the head of state. The Green Knight is openly questioning Arthur's rule and with one stroke of his mighty ax could bring the whole system into chaos.

The members of the court clearly do not want their way of living to be disrupted. Their survival depends on a rigid structure. An open challenge to this structure is a direct attack on their way of life. The Green Knight's verbal onslaught, in full view of the court would therefore threaten the members of this society. The king, the head to their body, is being bullied by an outside force who, apparently, is not afraid of Arthur. When the only way of life that they know is threatened, the only viable response is to rally behind their one means of survival.

The way that the text has been punctuated, however, the court openly questions the rule of their king. At the end of this "speech," the court supposedly in one collective sigh ask themselves, "Who knew euer any kyng such counsel to take / As knyghtes in cauel[aci]oun3 on cryst-masse gomme3?" (682-83). This rhetorical question is a direct and open attack on the leadership ability of Arthur. While the previous eight lines might place the blame for Sir Gawain's impending doom on fate, on Arthur, on the Green Knight, or on the rashness of Gawain himself, depending on which modern translation that we are reading, lines 682-83, as punctuated by modern editors, can only be construed as an blatant, verbal questioning of the king's stature as commander by the court. For the court collectively and aggressively to question the authority of a king would be a near impossibility. The court could not as a whole challenge the authority of their ruler without bringing into question their own means of livelihood. The narrator, however, is under no such obligation, and this passage

directly and safely implicates Arthur and his mishandling of his position of power. These eight lines belong to the narrator who is questioning the rule of King Arthur. The narrator, who does not depend on the king for his survival, is in a position to step back and comment on the true nature of the king.

Second, let us consider the way the *Gawain*-poet portrays Arthur elsewhere in the poem and the way this depiction should affect our reading of the narrator's commentary of the king's ruling behavior. Lines 676-83 are not the only place that the narrator questions the ruling of King Arthur. The first twenty-nine lines of this poem describe a very brief history of the British reign. At first glance, this description seems to be positive, describing previous rulers as "rych" leaders (20) who produced "Mo ferlyes on *bis* folde" (23). All of these rulers, the poem states, pale in comparison to the "wonderez" (29) produced by King Arthur. But who, really, is Arthur being compared to?

The *Gawain*-poet situates the rule of King Arthur as the most prominent leader of an empire that had its beginning based in treachery. The first person mentioned in this poem is Aeneas who, forming his "trammes of tresoun" (3) was a traitor to his own city.¹³ From this inglorious beginning emerges "Felix Brutus" (14), the legendary founder of Britain and the great-grandson of Aeneas. From his rule, "blysse" becomes mixed with "blunder" (18), and "werre & wrake & wonder" (16) produce an empire of "Bolde bredden"(21), chief of whom is Arthur.

The narrator of this poem situates this story in one version of England's history--a version that alludes to the beginning of Britain as being solidly intertwined with a king who abused his power. The sins of one leader are visited upon another and the narrator indirectly compares Arthur with these infamous kings. When we look at Arthur in this historical light as well as look at the descriptions of a prideful and boyish Arthur in the different passages of this poem, we see that the *Gawain*-poet has a definite agenda to comment negatively on the harmful pride of the youthful king.

I suggest an alternative way to punctuate this speech. By changing one small detail--the placement of the end quote--a stronger, more logical reading emerges from the text. By moving the end quote eight lines forward and having the court collectively say only one and a half lines, "bi Kryst, hit is *scaþe* / *Pat þou, leude, schal be lost, þat art of lyf noble!*" (674-75), the problems that I have raised with the punctuation in modern editions are eliminated. It makes sense that as the court sees Sir Gawain leave their company and head to his doom, they would collectively express his worthiness and curse his fortune with an oath--"bi Kryst"--without placing the blame for his demise on their youthful king. This response is not too specific, but a general heart-felt response where they can feel sorry for their beloved knight without placing any blame on the head of their state. It is not a direct attack on their king and his immature behavior, only a general sorrow over an

unfortunate situation of a favored knight. No lines of power have been crossed, the court is not taking a political stand against their king, the emperor still has his clothes on, and the political order is not questioned.

Moving the end quote to the end of line 675 allows the following eight lines to be the voice of the narrator stepping in and making a direct comment on the pride of Arthur. I have bold faced some of the pronouns to illustrate my point:

Al **þ**at sez **þ**at semly syked *in* hert,
& sayde *soþly* al same segges til oper,
Carande for **þ**at comly, ["]bi Kryst, hit is *scaþe*
Pat **þ**ou, leude, schal be lost, **þ**at art of lyf noble!
To fynde **hys** fere vpon folde, *in* fayth, is not *eþe*;
Warloker to haf wroost had more wyt bene,
& haf dyzt sonder dere a duk to haue wor**þ**ed;
A lowande leder of ledez *in* londe **hym** wel semez,
& so had better haf ben **þ**en britned to nozt,
Hadet wyth an aluisch mon, for angardez pryde.
Who knew euer any kyng such counsel to take,
As knyztez *in* cauel[aci]ounz on cryst-masse
gommez?["]

(672-83)

The punctuation I propose not only fits politically as I previously described, it makes sense grammatically as well. To have the end quotation mark placed at the end of line 683 as modern editors have it would condemn the *Gawain*-poet of the crime of not knowing his pronouns--a mistake that I might expect from my freshman composition students but not from the author of this magnificently written text. Line 672 shows that the court is watching Sir Gawain and lines 674-75 are a direct

reaction to the knight—"Pat *hou*, leude, schal be lost." There is, however, a definite switch in point of view in the remaining eight lines. Lines 674-75 are directed to "*hou*" the knight. Lines 676-83 are **about** the knight and "**hys**" unequality on earth. These eight lines do not belong to the court but to the narrator. They are a more general comment on Sir Gawain, praising him as a knight while suggesting a possible future if he was not destined to be a victim of "angardez pryde" (681). This empty pride is related to the next two lines, where the narrator directly rebukes the "*kyng*" (682) who becomes caught up in the profane "*cryst-masse gomes*" (683). The narrator is thus placing all the blame on the rash young king that all textual evidence seems to demand.

I would like to emphasize that I have neither changed a word of the *Gawain*-poet nor changed his word order. I have only changed the editorial punctuation--punctuation that was supplied not by the original poet but by modern editors. By moving one end quote from line 683 to line 675, we have rendered a puzzling passage coherent.

But does any of this make any difference? Does the moving of one small end quote make any significant change? The first editor made decisions on punctuation so that we, as readers, would be able to easily understand this moving narrative poem. I do, however, feel that it is important that we re-examine these editorial decisions, and in this particular case, make the changes that I have suggested. Two

narrator as severely criticizing the king in this text. In fact, by moving the end punctuation mark, I think it becomes clear that the narrator definitely does have an agenda in this poem to attack directly the youthful king and his abuse of his power position. Arthur has been let off the hook by modern editors, but I think if we look at this passage both politically and stylistically, we as reader-scholars, like the narrator, will put the blame squarely on the young king's shoulders.

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13. This debate is outlined in detail by Heinz Berger ("Two Courts: Two Modes of Existence in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *English Studies: A Journal of English Language and Literature* 67 (1986), 401-16), and Robert Blanch and Julian Wasserman ("The Medieval Court and the Gawain Manuscript," *The Medieval Court in Europe*, (ed.) Edward Haymes (Munich, 1986, 178-88).

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References

Available upon request.

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