

The Hollow Cave: Encounters With Feminine Sexuality as a Source of Purification and Renewal in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and The Faerie Queen

*Second Runner Up, Humanities*

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**It had a hole on the end and on either side,  
And was covered all over with patches of grass,  
And was hollow inside; nothing but an old cave...  
(Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, 201)**

*At length it brought them to a hollow cave,*

*Amidst the thickest woods...*

*(Spencer, 578)*

The above descriptions of caves, from Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and Edmund Spencer's The Faerie Queene, provide very similar depictions of a natural yet foreboding place. These caves are the locations of a critical turning point for both Sir Gawain and the Red Crosse Knight in their development as heroes, knights who have undergone trials of sexual temptation either upon or preceding their arrival. Described as a "a desolate place" (201) and "the place unknowne and wilde" (Spencer, 578), each cave is presented as a natural mystery. Because the suppression of sexual urges is emphasized in both texts, it can be suggested that the cave is metaphor for the feminine divine, a natural place of fertility and sexuality, thus providing further tests of faith and willpower, courage and conscience. While both characters are fearful of and even disgusted by what they find there—Sir Gawain's potential death at the hands of the ax-wielding Green Knight and Red Crosse Knight's battle with the female beast Error—upon their emergence from the cave each has been purified, gaining wisdom and truthful humility.

Geologically, the cave is a transitional place from above to below, from light to dark, from the known to the uncharted. Metaphorically it is a journey from the surface of naiveté to the depths of knowledge and renewal. Without the cave motif, these knights would have been denied the opportunity to show courage, while being humbled by their experiences. The cave as a metaphoric vulva provides both Sir Gawain and the Red Crosse Knight a place of heroic transition, where the fertile coupling of natural urges with religious faith gives birth to an undeniably higher level of spiritual understanding. Both

knights face a mortal danger and survive it, forever changed by the experience of their time in the divine womb. However, the tests they face are reflective of the time periods in which the texts were written.

In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a 14th century unattributed poem, the text is sympathetic to an interconnection with the fertile, cyclical natural world and a willingness to be Christian within it. The Green Knight is the colour of nature at its fertile best, and his arrival at King Arthur's court occurs at New Year, just after Christmas. The creature is holding a holly branch, an evergreen symbol of life everlasting in the darkest days of winter, and survives beheading just as a tree lives after a branch is cut from it. While these images suggest Nature's own renewing strengths, there is also an indication that the Green Knight is not entirely wild. The reader is told he rides "A green horse huge and strong, / A proud steed to restrain, / Spirited under bridle, / But obedient to the man" (150), thus melding human and natural qualities.

This description also reflects Gawain's own struggle to restrain his sexual longings for the knight Bartilak's seductive wife, for both courtly and religious reasons. On one side, Gawain's shield has the Christian image of the Virgin Mary, while the other sports a pentangle, "five points that was never unfinished, / Not uniting in one line nor separating either; / Without ending anywhere at any point that I find, / No matter where the line began or ran to an end." (162) This pre-Christian symbol is a nod to nature's wheel of the year, while serving the dual purpose of illustrating Gawain's virtues.

With the tone of the story established thus, it is not shocking to read how the mastery of the lady's sexual temptations are echoed in the mastery of Bartilak's hunting, until Gawain is compromised by the lady's gift of the green and gold girdle, colours that reflect those worn by the Green Knight. This constant blurring of courtly allegiance, religious chastity, and carnal desires continues, culminating in the arrival at the "mound" (200) where Gawain meets with the Green Knight. The cave is described as an unchristian place:

*This chapel looks evil, with grass overgrown; / Here fittingly might the man dressed in green/Perform his devotions, in devilish ways...This is a chapel of disaster, may ill-luck befall it! / It is the most damnable church I was ever inside. (201)*

Regardless, Gawain stays to keep his "tryst" (201) with the Green Knight. Because he removes his helmet, his head and neck are naked to the ax's blade, just as he was unarmed during the lady's advances. Here masculine and feminine imagery abounds, even to the point of suggesting that Gawain is a feminine counterpart to the Green Knight, who holds the "shaft" (205) of the ax. When he is nicked by the Green Knight's third stroke, Gawain bleeds, like a woman may upon the loss of her virginity. Here is the moment of Gawain's rebirth as a man, confirmed by a direct natal reference, "Never since that man was born of his mother / Had he ever in the world felt half so relieved" (204). He leaves his passive submission behind at the cave, returning to Camelot and confessing his story to the court, where he is received as a courageous hero. When the entire court agrees to don a green sash, it is a confirmation of natural order within a noble state constructed upon a Christian-based hierarchy.

Nature imagery and Christianity are not nearly as ambiguous in *The Faerie Queene*. Spencer's Reformation-era allegory contains considerably more intolerant imagery, suggesting the outright repudiation of natural forces which are equated with an abhorrent mistrust of Catholicism. It is as if the nature of nature has changed from the fourteenth century to the sixteenth century, becoming an even bigger threat as it becomes infused with Catholic wickedness. In both texts, nature is defined as sexual temptation. Giving in to these earthly desires is a betrayal of faith. While *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* reflects a nervous respect for nature and its possibility for renewal, there is no such respect given nature in *The Faerie Queene*, where it becomes clear that anything which compromises a singular approach to Protestant Christian worship is ghastly and evil. Yet Red Crosse Knight is still led to a cave where he must tackle both his sexual desire and his spiritual faith.

*The Faerie Queene* opens with Red Crosse riding in full armor, the red cross on his shield clearly representing Christianity in sharp contrast to Sir Gawain's interconnected pentangle. This knight's armor is dented, not from battle, but from jousting, a sport given to winning over the favours of a lady. He is on a quest on behalf of the faerie queen Gloriana, symbolic of the reigning Queen Elizabeth I. Gloriana's otherworldliness protects Elizabeth, known as the Virgin Queen, from any sexual compromise.

Gloriana's request of Red Crosse is to banish a dragon that's harassing the parents of the chaste Una, who represents the true Church of England and accompanies the knight on his journey. However, en route to this ultimate battle there occurs an encounter with a different monster, whose existence draws attention to the sexual tension between Red Crosse and his companion. This tension erupts almost immediately when a storm lets loose upon them and they take shelter in a grove. Spencer's description of the woods is laden with feminine sexual imagery and phallic symbols. The trees in full leaf "Did spread so broad" (578) and the characters describe them admiringly, using suggestive sexual images such as birch being used for "shaftes" (578) and the "Mirrhe sweet bleeding in the bitter wound" (578).

Having been "led with delight" (578) into the forest, Red Crosse and Una cannot find their way out again, and stumble upon a cave. Una warns Red Crosse of the dangers of entering the cave, cautioning him to withhold his "stroke" (578) as it is the home of the monster Error. The verses leading up to this battle are charged with languorous sexual imagery, but the tone becomes sharply negative and disgusting once Red Crosse is inside the cave. Error, a symbol for the Catholic Church, is described as part monster, part woman. It is a blatant blending of the rejection of the feminine divine, represented by the natural sexual world, and satanic influences all at once. "Halfe like a serpent horribly displaide, / But th' other halfe did womans shape retaine, / Most lothsom, filthie, foule, and full of vile disdain." (579)

When Red Crosse grapples with the beast, his sword cannot fell her and his shield is compromised. Unlike Gawain, this knight's disarmament is equated with faith, not exposure to nature. He chokes Error, and in her death throes she vomits out books and papers (Catholic propaganda) along with disgusting, stinky "lumpes of flesh and gobbets raw" (579). The fertility in this cave is the beast's "fruitfull cursed spawne of serpents small" (580) which feed upon Error's flesh until bursting, their own

deaths representing sterility and the brutal end of any association with the female beast. Red Crosse emerges from the cave and continues his journey "with God to frend" (581). Like Gawain, Red Crosse's heroic status is affirmed and by the end of the book he attains the virtue of holiness.

Neither knight could achieve their heroism without the cave as temptress. It is ironically necessary for the heroes to transform from youthful lust to more chaste and pure followers of Christ by encountering this natural, mysterious dark opening. Without the feminine divine, beckoning with sexual allure, there would be no wisdom gained or purification of the spirit. While the cave serves as a precarious partner in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, even in its most wretched state there must be an acknowledgement of its role in *The Faerie Queene*. Without the feminine divine, the masculine divine would be emasculated.

### **Works Cited**

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