

# The Green Knight as Saracen and Mentor

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The identity of the Green Knight/Lord Bertilak character in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is one that is complicated at best. Many critics cite similarities between the Green Knight and other Muslim knights in medieval European literature, and even figures from Islamic folklore such as al-Khadir. These claims are substantial, and it is fair to suggest that, at least as the Green Knight, the character is or represents a Saracen. However, problems arise when the question of Lord Bertilak's identity comes into play. He does not embody the Saracen tropes in the same way as the Green Knight, yet the two figures are the same person. This apparent discrepancy can be reconciled if the reader views Lord Bertilak as an example of a convert to Christianity who is passing within English society, and the Green Knight as a reversion back to his original Saracen identity. In this tale, the character uses his dual identity to test and thereby assist the Knights of the Round Table. This interpretation makes *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* a more sympathetic, and realistic, conversion story when compared with other romances of the time.

In medieval literature, the Saracen stands as a default enemy of sorts. If a knight is to prove his worth, he is more often than not expected to fight and stand victorious against a Saracen army. In this show of prowess, the enemy must present not only a physical threat but a moral one as well (Cordery 89). In this respect, Saracens are the perfect choice: their defeat signals a victory not only for the knights but for Christianity as a whole.

Throughout medieval romance, beauty serves as an indicator of morality and goodness, and deformity as an indicator of moral corruption and evil. Saracens developed a distinctive appearance in these texts, in order to highlight their role as the threatening other. Leona Cordery notes that "the vast majority of Saracens are described...as being black...Thus their general character is sinful; their color bearing witness to their being in collusion with the devil makes them enemies of God..." and that "...the authors also incorporate Saracens of various colors" (93). The vivid and bizarre colors used to describe the Saracens distance them from the lily-white knights and highlight their exotic origins. There are instances when, upon converting to Christianity, the Saracen magically becomes white (Cordery 94). This transformation suggests that their coloration is less indicative of a permanent, physical state, but more a reflection of their spiritual standing.

Beyond their unusual coloring, Saracens are almost always gigantic. This allows them to be physically imposing figures and, combined with their implied relationship with

demonic forces, a great challenge to the knight in question (Cordery 93). Their massive size is frequently depicted as a grotesque deformity rather than the Adonis-like build seen in Christian nobility, although there are exceptions. For example, Sir Fierabras's slender waist and impressive physique are less horrifying than they are signals of virility and prowess. It is no surprise, then, when he converts to Christianity and slaughters Saracens. His attractiveness is as much an indicator of his inevitable conversion as it would be an indicator of morality in a Christian knight. For the other Saracens, however, their physicality allows them to exist as bogeymen of sorts, with each retelling exaggerating their stature to the point of absurdity (Cordery 93). Their sheer size also allows for the very act of fighting the much smaller knights to demonstrate their dubious morality. Fighting men half their size makes the Saracens appear to be unchivalrous and cowardly, as it theoretically would be like fighting a child. The knights, on the other hand, appear to be even more heroic when they defeat the evil giants.

With such obvious physical traits, the average Saracen is rather easy to identify. However, if an individual chooses to convert to Christianity, he or she will either completely change form or deviate from stereotypical appearances all together. The clearest example of this transformation first happens in the *King of Tars* text, wherein a Christian woman and a Saracen man have a horrifically deformed child who lacks any clear identity. The mother prays, after a futile attempt to do the same is made by the father, and the child becomes beautiful. Upon seeing this metamorphosis, the father decides to convert to Christianity and promptly shifts from being black to white (Cordery 94). The child's original condition reaffirms the importance of appearance as an indication of moral standing, as he existed in a state between Christianity and Islam. The father's influence prevents the child from being a proper Christian until the mother calls upon divine intervention from a Christian God. The child is aligned with the mother and is then able to become beautiful. The Saracen's decision to convert allows for an obvious, if problematic, transformation. His black coloration aligns him with the devil and other evil forces, but his decision to abandon this alignment in favour of Christianity allows him to become white and beautiful. He is able to completely become a new man, as he takes on a new name and forces conversion on all of his subjects.

Fierabras, in contrast, consistently maintains an unusual level of attractiveness, especially for a Saracen. As previously mentioned, his size never detracts from his beauty, but rather serves as a physical reminder of his prowess and nobility. Phillipa Hardman writes:

Fierabras' size provides a physical referent for his status as an alien, hostile outsider, linking him while in his unconverted state with monstrous Saracen giants...but without their ugliness and grotesque features, so that...it is not difficult for Fierabras to be re-presented as an ideal specimen of knighthood. (68)

He is distinct from other Saracens from the start, and it is through conversion that Fierabras fully abandons his roots. Much like the sultan from the *King of Tars* text, the killing of his own kind fully solidifies his identity as a Christian and, more importantly, as a Christian knight.

Both conversion stories require very specific circumstances. The individual in question must be of noble blood and must otherwise stand outside Saracen norms. For the

sultan, it is his Christian wife and the witnessing of a miracle that allow him to escape his identity as a Saracen. Sir Fierabras has both his role as the son of the King of Spain and his unusual attractiveness to set him apart from the sinful brutes, in addition to his willingness to become a “proper” knight. Both men also dramatically display their abandonment of their previous selves with varying degrees of violence. The sultan, acting as a man of power and responsibility, ensures that his people are also “saved” through conversion, even if that requires force. Fierabras, on the other hand, must go on to prove his knighthood in the same way that any other Christian knight would, by killing Saracens. There is no middle ground: the individual is either completely Saracen, or completely Christian, and the two identities are mutually exclusive.

However, the Green Knight character exists as both the pre-conversion Saracen and the post-conversion lord. As the Green Knight, he becomes a classic example of the Saracen Other. However, as Lord Bertilak, he blends in seamlessly with European culture, with fancy silks and Christian feasts. This split identity is a poignant demonstration of the dual consciousness that arises from such a dramatic change in an individual’s identity. Rather than choose a single identity, as Sir Fierabras and the sultan did, the Green Knight comfortably fits into both roles and alternates between the two as he sees fit. Thus, the Green Knight identity can be read as his original or initial role, and indeed is the primary figure in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The Lord Bertilak identity, then, is representative of his attempts to “pass” as a Christian lord when it behoves him. This portrayal of such successful managing of two disparate identities makes the character unusually complex and suggests a more sympathetic view of Saracens than is seen in most romances. Even the aforementioned conversion stories demand that the characters fit neatly into either the “good Christian” or “evil Saracen” category, and reject the notion that they might want to hold on to some part of their past lives.

His physical appearance is the most striking quality of the Green Knight for Arthur and his Knights. His nobility is indisputable, but it is exceedingly clear that he is the Other:

...From broad neck to buttocks so bulky and thick,  
And his loins and his legs so long and so great,  
Half a giant on earth I hold him to be...  
For in back and in breast though his body was grim,  
His waist in its width was worthily small,  
And formed with every feature in fair accord was he. (138-146)

As seen in most descriptions of Saracens, the Green Knight is a literal giant and, much like Sir Fierabras, his physicality is at once terrifying and beautiful. However, his massiveness does not come at the cost of his attractiveness and therefore his nobility. Rather, it only serves to enhance his impressiveness, especially when placed in a room of men whom the audience already considers to be noble and impressive. From this point follows a description of the sheer greenness of the Green Knight and the fine clothes he is wearing:

And in guise all of green, the gear and the man:  
A coat cut close, that clung to his sides,

And a mantle to match, made with a lining  
Of furs cut and fitted—the fabric was noble,  
Embellished all with ermine, and his hood beside,  
That was loosed from his locks, and laid on his shoulders  
With trim hose and tight, the same tint of green,  
His great calves were girt, and gold spurs under  
He bore on silk bands that embellished his heels... (151-160)

Once again, his physical appearance calls upon common Saracen characteristics, this time with the color most commonly associated with Islam and the East in general. While this color is also connected with magic and paganism, other textual connections to the Islamic world suggest that the color's associations with Islam are more substantial in the context of the text. His nobility is emphasized throughout this passage, along with his attempts to integrate into English society. While he makes no effort to hide his unusual greenness, his clothing and fabric choices suggest that he has blended both Islamic fabrics and English styles of dress. The combination of ermine and silk, unremarkable in other characters, exemplifies his dual character, as it blends the strictly European fur with the imported Eastern silk. The Green Knight's clothing is well tailored, trimmed with European furs, and finely embroidered. However, he is very clearly not dressed for battle.

Beyond just his clothing, what the Green Knight carries into Arthur's court is of particular interest:

But in his hand he had a holly bob  
That is goodliest green where groves are bare;  
And an ax in the other, a huge and immense,  
A wicked piece of work in words to expound:  
The head on its shaft was an ell long;  
The spike of green steel, resplendent with gold;  
The blade burnished bright, with a broad edge,  
As well shaped to shear as a sharp razor;  
Stout was the stave in the strong man's gripe,  
That was wound all with iron to the weapon's end,  
With engravings in green of goodliest work... (206-216)

The holly is appropriate, given that he is visiting Arthur on Christmas Eve. In addition to being a rather obvious symbol of the Christian holiday, the red color of the berries stands in stark contrast to the Knight's overwhelming greenness. Red is seen consistently throughout the text, and with the exception of the Green Knight's rolling eyes and the holly berries, is almost always associated in this text with European, Christian characters. When the Green Knight mocks the knights for not volunteering to meet his challenge, they begin to turn red:

...With this he laughs so loud that the lord grieved;  
The blood for sheer shame shot to his face, and pride.  
With rage his face flushed red,  
And so did all beside. (316-320)

The knights' flushed faces not only serve to signal their youth, but also further demonstrate the differences between the figure of the Green Knight and the Knights of the Round Table. Red is seen again in Gawain's arming scene, where his shield is said to have "shone all red/With the pentangle portrayed in purest gold" (619-620). Lady Bertilak is also "bedecked in bright red" and, while Lord Bertilak has Saracen origins, she is "fresh as the first snow fallen upon hills" (952-956). All the major characters of clear European descent are identified with the color red, providing a sharp contrast to the Green Knight.

Gold, however, is seen throughout almost every description. As a clear indication of wealth, it marks every character as being of noble descent. While the gold color is of some importance for the obviously Christian characters, it is a strict necessity for the Green Knight, if other depictions of Saracens are considered. Both Sir Fierabras and the sultan in *King of Tars* are clearly noble, and this allows the audience to assume that they possess an inherent moral superiority. As common Saracens are nothing more than raging beasts in romances such as *King Horn* or *The Siege of Milan*, the Green Knight needs to distinguish himself as a proper knight through his wealth and noble status. The use of gold also connects the characters in the same way that their style of dress does, as a cultural indication of social standing and intent.

As the blatantly Saracen Green Knight, he is threatening enough to Arthur's court. He has proven himself to be a threat simply by existing, thereby heightening the danger for the other knights, but must ensure that he is perceived as not just a lumbering beast. He states:

You may be certain by the branch that I bear in hand  
That I pass here in peace, and would part friends,  
For had I come to this court on combat bent,  
I have a hauberk at home, and a helm beside,  
A shield and a sharp spear, shining bright,  
And other weapons as well, war-gear of the best;  
But as I willed no war, I wore no metal. (265-271)

The Green Knight maintains an air of joviality throughout his encounter with Arthur and his knights, demonstrating his comfort with English nobility. He pokes fun at the young men, asking, "Where is...[t]he captain of this crowd? Keenly I wish to see that sire with sight, and to himself say my say," when Arthur's identity should be blatantly obvious (224-227). He walks along the edge of court etiquette without stepping over the line, allowing himself to be frightening enough to test the knights without scaring them beyond reason. His identity as the Green Knight is useful in this respect but is less desirable when more diplomacy is needed, such as when, as Lord Bertilak, he negotiates a deal with Gawain.

Gawain acts as a foil for the Green Knight in rather interesting ways and permits the audience to view the story through the white, Christian lens to which they would have been accustomed. He is young, described by the Green Knight as a "beardless child," and is therefore rather innocent. His youth allows him to make mistakes and still be forgiven by both the Green Knight and the audience by the end of the text. When he gives in to temptation, it is because he is afraid rather than enticed. His fear is completely reasonable to

the reader, given the Green Knight's challenge. Despite this, Gawain is still able and willing to keep his promise to the Green Knight, which enables the audience to see his worthiness as a Knight of the Round Table. As Gawain leaves to embark on his quest, he is in full armour and prepared for the worst:

His thick-thewed thighs, with thongs bound fast,  
And massy chain-mail of many a steel ring  
He bore on his body, above the best cloth,  
On his arms, at his elbows, armor well wrought  
Protected that prince, with plated gloves,  
And all the goodly gear to grace him well  
That tide. (579-585)

While the Green Knight has faith that the knights will not slaughter him—slaughter was a fair possibility given how Saracens were viewed—Gawain is still rather unsure about the entire undertaking. Gawain is vulnerable in a way that allows for a sympathetic audience and a more satisfying ending when he learns his lesson.

Lord Bertilak's castle is another indication of his ability to blend into English society, as it is stylistically appropriate for the time and place, while still being filled with Islamic art. This mixing of styles is indicative of not only his status but also his role as a convert. He was presumably wealthy as a Saracen, wealth indicating virtue and a susceptibility to conversion, and he maintains this status as a Christian. His high social standing demonstrates the role of the noble identity in conversion stories, just as neither Sir Fierabras nor the sultan in *King of Tars* could transform himself were it not for his prestigious role in society. Nobility as a pre-condition to conversion connects with the notions that morality is an attribute of the noble classes and that the noble Saracen is more likely to convert because of his or her greater morality.

The combination of the Eastern and Western fashions is seen in physical descriptions of the Green Knight, and while it does not show in Lord Bertilak's outward appearance, it can be seen in the tapestries that Gawain finds in his castle:

They pass into a parlor, where promptly the host  
Has a servant assigned him to see his needs,  
And there came upon his call many courteous folk  
That brought him to a bower where bedding was noble,  
With heavy silk hanging hemmed all in gold,  
Coverlets and counterpanes curiously wrought,  
A canopy over the couch, clad all with fur,  
Curtains running on cords, caught to gold rings,  
Woven rugs on the walls of eastern work,  
And the floor, under foot, well-furnished with the same. (850-859)

Gawain's interactions with Lord Bertilak suggest that Gawain is rather comfortable with the post-conversion identity:

Gawain gazed on the host that greeted him there,  
And a lusty fellow he looked, the lord of that place:  
A man of massive mold, and of middle age;  
Broad, bright was his beard, of a beaver's hue,  
Strong, steady his stance, upon stalwart shanks,  
His face fierce as fire, fair-spoken withal,  
And well-suited he seemed in Sir Gawain's sight  
To be a master of men in a might keep. (842-849)

For a few reasons, Gawain should make some connection between the gigantic, bearded Green Knight and the gigantic, bearded Bertilak. As a knight, Gawain would be familiar with both nobility and Saracen, and should be able to recognize and distinguish between them. As there is little indication that anything beyond the color of the Green Knight has changed, Gawain should be able to peg Bertilak as being at least vaguely Saracen. In addition, the Green Knight is the only reason why Gawain is on his quest, so one would think that he would remember what the Green Knight looks like. While Gawain's failure to make the connection may be another sign of Gawain's naiveté, it could also be an indication of how well Lord Bertilak is able to disguise his Green Knight identity. While Gawain's innocence certainly plays a role here, as he may not be able to pick up on the more subtle signs of Bertilak's Saracen origins, it is far more likely that Bertilak is so highly attuned to English culture and so adept at mimicking it that he fools even keen knights.

Some obvious indications point to Lord Bertilak's identity as a convert. Like the sultan in the *King of Tars* text, he physically changes color from Islamic green to Christian white. While the text claims that this change occurs because of Morgan le Fey's involvement in orchestrating the plot, such a clunky plot device does not fit in with the more subtle aspects of the text. Her role in the text is little more than a plot device to resolve moral ambiguities involving the Green Knight/Lord Bertilak dynamic. However, it could be said that the physical changes are a metaphor for his taking on a new role. While in other texts the metamorphosis is permanent, the Green Knight's conversion story is more nuanced. He does not seek to destroy his past, as Fierabras and the sultan do. Rather, the Green Knight embraces it as a part of his identity, while recognizing the necessity of passing as an Englishman in this culture. He is clearly well informed about Christian beliefs and rituals, as seen with the "sundry fish," massive feasts, acknowledgment of Christmastime traditions, and the chapel in his castle:

There are soups of all sorts, seasoned with skill,  
Double-sized servings, and sundry fish,  
Some baked, some breaded, some broiled on the coals,  
And with sauces to sup that suited his taste,  
He confesses it a feast with free words and fair . . . (890-894)

It is shortly hereafter that Gawain meets Lady Bertilak. She presents an interesting facet of the text, as she embodies both Christian and Saracen characteristics. It would be difficult to claim that she is a Saracen, however, because she is quintessentially white in her physical descriptions. She is also dressed entirely in red, just like Gawain. However, she is a



character of raw sexuality, which presents a huge danger for Gawain. Not only does she threaten his chastity, she also threatens his masculinity by being a hunter rather than the hunted. She is an extremely dangerous woman and is, rather interestingly, far more of a threat than the Green Knight. While the Green Knight is frighteningly foreign, he does not seek to harm or dismember Gawain. He simply wishes to test his morality. Lady Bertilak, on the other hand, is a momentous threat as she actively tries to rob Gawain of the thing he is best known for: courtesy. Sleeping with the lord's wife would be a huge mistake on Gawain's part, yet she shows up at his bedroom, night after night, trying to seduce him. Gawain's moral stamina is tested extensively by this woman and, in regard to sexual purity, he never fails. However, everything changes when she offers him the girdle.

The girdle is a vital component of the text. Just like Fierabras's sister Floripas, Lady Bertilak uses her sexuality to accomplish her goals and gives a magic girdle. Girdles are, according to Hardman, a symbol of intimate sexuality (63). However, while the giving of the girdle may have been sexual in nature in the Gawain text, the girdle itself is not. One interpretation is that the girdle is a symbol of the close personal relationship that a knight must have with God. It maintains the intimacy of the girdle but in a spiritual, rather than a sexual, way. The girdle makes the wearer literally immortal, echoing the immortality promised by Christianity through faith. The entire challenge put forth by the Green Knight is to teach Gawain to have faith in the face of the impossible and to resist the temptation to act dishonorably. These are key tenets of Christianity and are essential virtues for the chivalric knight. By accepting the girdle, Gawain gives in to the temptation of fear and the promise of immortal life made under unsavoury conditions. This is a forgivable sin, as he still takes a leap of faith and ultimately faces his fear of death. The Green Knight acknowledges that it is all right for Gawain to fear death because this is a natural and healthy fear. It is for this reason that the Green Knight pardons Gawain and gives him the girdle, ensuring that the lesson he has learned will be bolstered through the personal relationship Gawain has with God. This would be rather a bizarre and mildly blasphemous action for the Green Knight if he were still a Saracen. After all, the Green Knight essentially embodies the role of a priest at this point. However, if we see Lord Bertilak as a convert, and the Green Knight as a reversion to the pre-convert Saracen identity, it could be said that this giving of the blessing is a small hiccup in the otherwise flawless finish of Lord Bertilak's Christian identity.

The hunting scenes are rather interesting, and of some importance. They signal to the reader that Lord Bertilak is every bit the gentleman, with his impressive hunting skills and accurate disembowlings. This is another example of the stunning accuracy of the text, a quality that is seen in many other aspects, from the clothing to the architecture. His skill as a hunter solidifies his status as a nobleman and provides for some interesting metaphors involving Gawain and Lady Bertilak, with the final scene with the fox being the most important. In this bizarre scene with the fox, the animal is referred to as "Sir Reynard," which indicates a kind of reverence for the slain that is not really seen in the other scenes:

The racket that they raised for Sir Reynard's soul that died.  
Their hounds they praised and fed,  
Fondling their heads with pride,



And they took Reynard the Red  
And stripped away his hide. (1916-1921)

More importantly, the respectful form of address aligns the fox with Gawain, as he is the only other knight in the story. There is the association with the color red, the fox, and Gawain. Both the fox and Gawain use discretion and cunning, but ultimately fail. The killing of the fox is more tragic than the other hunts, because it ostensibly foreshadows Gawain's fate. However, it does not indicate Gawain's physical death so much as it indicates the death of his reputation for courtesy with Lord Bertilak. Gawain ultimately recovers from his dishonourable act, but he bears the mark of this soiling on his neck. While he claims it to be a badge of humility, the mark can be read as a tarnish on his character. It is not fatal and, in fact, makes him a better knight as he learns a lesson about faith and God, but it is still a mark that he must bear. The girdle is his real reward and, as we have seen, that is the grace of God bestowed upon him by the Green Knight.

When Gawain comes across the Green Chapel, an immediate connection to both Saracen and the Devil is apparent:

Then he halted his horse, and held the rein fast,  
And sought on every side for a sight of the Chapel,  
But no such place appeared, which puzzled him sore,  
Yet he saw some way off what seemed like a mound,  
A hillock high and broad, hard by the water,  
Where the stream fell in foam down the face of the steep  
And bubbled as if it boiled on its bed below...  
Much wondering what it was, but no whit the wiser;  
It had a hole on one end, and on either side...  
"Can this be the Green Chapel?  
Alack!" said the man, "Here might  
The Devil himself be seen  
Saying matins at black midnight!" (2168-2188)

The rounded shape of the Green Chapel can be interpreted as a nod toward Middle Eastern architecture, where rounded ceilings can be seen in many buildings such as the Faith Mosque in Istanbul. In addition, the three openings described on the structure are also indications that the Green Chapel might resemble a mosque. If we interpret this as a holy place for Saracens, the fact that it is referred to as a chapel by Lord Bertilak is rather interesting. He could have just as easily referred to it as a mound or otherwise, but made the conscious decision to call it a *chapel*, indicating some residual reverence for the structure. When the Green Knight blesses Gawain on these grounds, the act further hints at a blending of the two cultures in Lord Bertilak's mind. This also explains the way that he forgives Gawain of his sins. While his understanding of Christianity is not infallible, Lord Bertilak is certainly a more realistic portrayal of a convert than those found in many other texts. Lord Bertilak presents Gawain with the girdle, and Gawain's faith is proven.

Considering the text is about a test of faith, it would not be surprising if Lord Bertilak is meant to be an example of a convert who had reconciled both his Saracen and his Christian identities. This process would have allowed him to better survive as an Englishman, and he does this successfully. While his interactions with Gawain as both the Green Knight and Lord Bertilak say a great deal about Gawain on the surface, they also say quite a bit about the relationship the convert has with both his identities. Rather than denying one or the other, he accepts both. While his ability to blend in as Lord Bertilak is undoubtedly useful for avoiding attacks from the dozens of knights roaming about, his role as the Green Knight is one that is difficult to give up. The idea that the plot was orchestrated by Morgan le Fey is paltry at best, and may have simply been an afterthought by the Gawain-poet in order to clear up moral ambiguities. The rest of the text stands as an unusual example of a complex, sympathetic Saracen character, who uses his dual identity in order to assist the Knights of the Round Table rather than attack them.

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