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Zita Hüsing

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (*SGGK*), an anonymous fourteenth-century Middle English poetic narrative, tells a marvellous adventure within the realm of the Arthurian courtly romance.[1] In the poem, the Green Knight (GK), a mysterious, gigantic knight clad in green, visits the Arthurian court, an event that forms the crux of the narrative. The GK challenges each of the courtly knights to attack him with an axe, as long as they are willing to receive a returning strike from the GK a year and a day later. Sir Gawain accepts the challenge and beheads the GK, who surprises his audience by picking up his own head and leaving the court. A year later, Sir Gawain fulfils his promise and goes on a quest in search of the GK. After wandering through the wilderness of Wille he arrives at Hautdesert, the residence of Sir Bertilak, where Lady Bertilak attempts to seduce him. At the conclusion the GK reveals himself as Bertilak of Hautdesert, an envoy of the enchantress Morgan Le Fay. He inflicts only a small cut on Sir Gawain's neck, a power manoeuvre within a larger scheme initiated by Morgan le Fay. The GK then reveals himself as Morgan's servant, explaining to Gawain: "Ho wayned me upon this wyse to your wynne halle / For to assay the surquidré, yif hit sothe were" / "She sent me in this wise to your rich hall to assay its pride and try if it were true" (*SGGK* 2456-2457, Neilson 49).

This article argues that GK/Bertilak functions as a tool or object for Morgan le Fay to influence and disrupt the Arthurian court, in a manner that complicates the GK's own sense of agency as he is entangled in a mesh of materiality surrounding his body, agency, and knighthood. By investigating the materiality of the knight through a close examination of the human and non-human objects associated with him, such as his holly-branch, his axe, and his own head, this analysis will reveal the function of the GK's body as a tool. Indeed, I contend that his body becomes a magical *body-as-thing* in conjunction with Morgan Le Fay's role as a representation of the magical or 'marvelous' aspects of the poem that contributes to its ambiguity, which Scott Lightsey in *Manmade Marvels in Medieval Culture and Literature* (2007) argues is a "spellbinding" introspection of "magical *thingness*" (3, original emphasis). By drawing on contemporary theories of materiality, particularly in line with New Materialist thought, I offer a reconsideration of the GK as both object and objectified.

New Materialist thinkers often seek to distance themselves from anthropocentric ideas and attempt to approach all things as having agency or meaning. With *Reassembling the Social:*

An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory (2005), Bruno Latour's work partially inspired this new theoretical turn as well as Martin Heidegger's works *Being and Time* (1927) and his essay "The Thing" (1971). Latour coined the idea of Actor-Network-Theory (ANT), which focusses on the distributive agency involved when human and nonhuman actors interact with one another. For Latour, ANT reveals that it is necessary to observe the actors to thus "learn from them what the collective existence has become in their hands, which methods they have elaborated to make it fit together, which accounts could best define the new associations that they have been forced to establish" (12). Latour foreshadowed the theoretical importance of investigating networks as relations between *things* and emphasised the value to re-think and rebalance humanity's relationship with materiality. Additionally, Heidegger's work inspired the philosophical movement of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), including such prominent scholars as Ian Bogost, Levi Bryant, and Graham Harman. In *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (2018), Harman defines OOO as a new "theory of everything," separating it into its main components of objects "that need to be explained rather than assumed" and ontology as "the study of being" or metaphysics (21, 10). Thus, Harman also distances himself from Heidegger's preference of the terminology of the 'thing,' a declaration that Heidegger famously asserts in his 1927 work *Being and Time*. In a move away from Kantian anthropocentrism, Harman reflects that "contrary to the dominant assumption of philosophy since Kant, the true chasm in ontology lies not between humans and the world, but between *objects and relations*" which allows us to understand the "object in its own terms" (2002, 2, original emphasis). Harman separates his thinking from ANT, since OOO introduces a "flat ontology" or a study of being that erases distinctions between subjects and objects (2018, 217). In a flat ontology, all objects are "given equal attention" without any hierarchies, "whether they be human, non-human, natural, cultural, real, or fictional" (2018, 9). For instance, the human is no more important than an axe. Thus, the GK's head can become a meaningful object as well as his body, his axe, and his holly-branch. Far from being inert, I observe that these non-human objects emphasise the marvellous aspects of the poem while inviting an inquiry into the 'web of things' that the poem associates with the GK and consequently challenges notions of agency. In addition, I approach his unnatural, non-human/human body as a *thing* and his associated objects as meaningful *tools*.

Historically, scholars have focused on investigating the poem in terms of hunting, legal issues, knighthood, disability, speech, theology, animal studies and ecocriticism in its rich context.[2] A New Materialist reading of *SGGK* deviates from traditional critical readings and offers new insights of the meaning of bodies and materiality, illuminating 'things' about the poem that would otherwise be obscured. Instead of limiting actions to an anthropocentric depiction of "what 'intentional,' 'meaningful' humans do," it is important here to see how the GK acts as a material entity under Morgan's influence (Latour 71).

In this context, it is important to define objects, things, and tools. While Harman prefers the word *object,* Heidegger prefers the term *thing* (Harman 2018, 41). In Harman's reading of Heidegger, a thing describes "a hidden thing in its own right, beyond any false objectifications of it," while an object becomes interrelated with how we perceive an entity (42). For Harman, an object has a broader definition and he proposes that an object is "anything that cannot be entirely reduced

either to the components of which it is made or to the effects it has on other things" (43). Following Harman and Heidegger's insights, I prefer the term thing since it distances itself from the value judgment of objectification.[3] I draw on OOO as a highly relevant approach to *SGGK* to challenge the binaries of "life/matter, human/animal, will/determination, and organic/inorganic," while positioning "*things* at the center of being" (Bennett x; Bogost 6, original emphasis).[4]

Further, I want to draw attention to the terminology of the *tool*. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger studies 'being' by famously pointing out the uses of a hammer and a doorknob (96). He elaborates how the process of "hammering itself uncovers the specific manipulability ("*handlichkeit*") of the hammer" (26, original emphasis). The hammer thus possesses a kind of Being named "readiness-to hand" or *zuhandenheit*, which establishes the hammer's true being as a tool instead of being simply an object which is just present-at hand (*dasein*) (98, original emphasis). Heidegger realises that the meaning of "the vessel's thingness does not lie at all in the material of which it consists but in the void that holds," in the readiness-to-hand (1971, 169). In his work *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (2002), Harman takes up the terminology of readiness-at-hand and refers to it as "tool-being" (4). He applies Heidegger's famous tool analysis not only to technical devices but also to "*all* entities, no matter how useful or useless they might be" (4, original emphasis). This universal application of Heidegger's work ultimately led to the idea of a flat object-oriented philosophy (1). Harman's interpretation of Heidegger's work inspired my approach to the GK as a "tool-being" which combines a reading of both his body-as-thing and a reading of *things* as agents or tools in the poem. In particular, the arrival scene of the GK at the Arthurian court accentuates a web of *things* because it reveals the GK's role as a *tool-being* in a critical reading of his magical-body-as-thing.

The Magical Body-as-Thing

The poem begins by describing the Christmas setting of the young Arthurian court that has not yet "come of age" and includes a young King Arthur surrounded by his various knights (Cohen 1999, 146). The immaturity of the court is central to the poem since Gawain's quest, as my analysis will show, demonstrates his cowardice as a form of weakness. Morgan in particular criticises the empty performativity of the court and its overemphasis on materiality and indulgence. Ultimately, Morgan's plot is for the GK to reveal the internal instabilities at Arthur's court as a political move to imply that the court lacks moral integrity due to their comfortableness, over-abundance of wealth, and their pride. When the GK arrives, the knights and ladies of Camelot are celebrating Christmas in an environment of abundance: food, celebrations, kiss-exchanges and gift-giving in "rechles merthes"/ "great mirth" (*SGGK* 40, Neilson 4). This material wealth and indulgence of the court contradicts the abstract materialism of moral integrity associated with the Arthurian knight. From the opening of the poem, the narrative presents the court as materially enriched in food and gifts; a focus of material wealth, which already foregrounds the importance of things.

The GK interrupts the celebratory atmosphere by arriving in the moment when King Arthur states that he would not eat dinner "er hym devised were, Of sum aventurus thyng an uncouthe

tale, Of sum mayn mervayle, that he myght trawe" / "before he was told an uncouth tale of some adventurous thing, of some great marvel that he could believe" (Neilson 3, *SGGK* 91-95). Promptly, the GK announces himself as a terrible "noise," a description that re-occurs upon his re-entrance at the end of the poem (Neilson 4). I read this noise as both the rude interruption of the Christian festivities just after the serving of the first course and the announcement of the 'othered' non-human, animalistic agent. He storms into the hall as an overwhelming verdant presence and is described "in height one of the tallest men in the world" (Neilson 4, *SGGK* 137). The depiction of the GK as a superbly green "half giant" or "aghlich mayster" further interrupts the ritual by presenting him as a supernatural, otherworldly, and marvelous non-human force (Neilson 4, *SGGK* 136). The GK's limbs are extremely "long and so grete," / "long and so great" thus highlighting his unusual stature (*SGGK* 139, Neilson 4). While focusing on the material aspect of the body, this intense description recalls how human bodies are themselves composed of matter. The emphasis of the gigantic physical proportions of the GK reads as a focus on his material presence rather than his character and invites a reading of the GK as a body-as-thing.

At the GK's abrupt arrival, the Arthurian knights become enthralled and "swogh sylence" / "deep silence" spreads through the hall (243, Neilson 6). This disappearance of human speech operates in the favour of the presence of the non-human or magical. The poem stresses the marvellous as central to the GK particularly after his beheading, as the court judges the knight as explicitly magical: "Forthi for fantoun and fayryye the folk there hit deemed" / "for phantom and faery the folk there deemed it" (240, Neilson 6). The court evokes phantoms and fairies, an association which can be linked to the enchantress or fairy Morgan Le Fay. The mentioning of fairies also connects the supernatural to the GK, who is described as "an alvish mon" / "an elvish man" (681, Neilson 15). The GK-as-thing demonstrates the enchantment of the mundane by the poem's presentation of the knight as marvellous or magical. Thus, the GK's arrival appears magical due to the impression of him being *more* than his material parts, especially due to his sudden disruption of the Christmas festivities. However, I argue the GK as a material thing equally provides excitement to the mundane environment of the court.

When considering the body of the GK and his transformation into Bertilak of Hautdesert, he represents "tensions between the ideal and the natural body" as well as tensions between the magical, transformative, non-human body and the human body (Westerhof 7).[5] It is important to recognise the Arthurian fascination with the "marvelous" or "otherworldly," an introspection that also foreshadows the enmeshment of the Christian tradition of Christmas with the marvellous (Green 2). This requirement for a "marvel" supports the general fascination of medieval writing with "wonder" as elaborated upon by Caroline Walker Bynum in the essay "Wonder" (1997, 3). Bynum states how "'Wonders' and 'marvels' have recently been the subject of a good deal of research on early modern Europe" and that historically, "the period from about 1180 to 1320 saw a great increase in stories of marvels, monsters, miracles, and ghosts" (2). The association of the GK's appearance as marvellous supports the etymological roots of the word *marvel* from the Latin *mirare* which implies "a visual *apparition*" (Le Goff 31, original emphasis). Thus, a marvel highlights here the significance of the GK as a thing. Bynum elaborates that marvels often stands out due to the "singularity and significance

of the thing," recognising that only "that which is different from the knower can trigger wonder" (3). The poem highlights the significance of the GK as a thing through an intricate description of his appearance – he is familiarly human but colourfully strange, clad entirely in green, with a green belt, a green holly-branch, a green axe, a green beard, and a green horse with a saddle of silk with natural embroideries, all in the same green (*SGGK* 166, 147, Neilson 4-5). The poem emphasises green as a colour that bears natural, earthly and thus material connotations that attempt to tie the GK to the natural world while opposing him to the artificial luxury of the court. The appearance of the GK also demonstrate how he is using *tools* such as the axe and the girdle to augment his position as a body-as-thing. The GK's overwhelming materiality makes his entrance so impactful but equally highlights his position as a controlled pawn in Morgan's plans. While asking ontological questions about the GK's state of being it becomes clear that the Knight occupies an in-between state of both human and non-human.

His "overal enker-greene" / "all green" 'natural' color is also emphasised by his green horse as a possible non-human reflection of the Knight's body, thus blurring the animal/human divide (*SGGK* 150, Neilson 4). As Susan Crane asserts in *Animal Encounters* (2013), this performance of knighthood and its connection to horse is "inextricably technical, organic, and symbolic" (140). In this sense, horses as *tools* function by augmenting the human. In a reading of the humans and their bodies-as-things, the human becomes tied to other things in a material, symbolic, and organic manner. The horse positions knights as privileged individuals and distinguishes them from other 'common' men. In this context, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's work *Medieval Identity Machines* (2003) unpacks the identity of knights which is deeply intertwined with chivalry which reflects upon a "code of idealized masculinity" (46). The green colour of the horse and the knight reflects upon this empty symbolism of the horse while mocking the code. In a parodic performance, Morgan uses the horse as a functioning tool or "revered body" to introduce the GK as a supposedly respectable knight (Cohen 2003, 46). Morgan critiques the Round Table reliance upon the chivalrous figure of knighthood. Thus, the GK's identity is an intertwinement of the significance of the horse as a tool and the symbolism of knighthood. This enmeshment illuminates how the ritual of celebration and 'honouring' knight of the Arthurian Round Table is ultimately an empty, material motion.

Reconsidering the Agency of Things

When approaching the GK as a thing, it is valuable to reconsider agency in the poem in relation to his body-as-thing. As I established, the poem presents his body in a fragmented manner. Additionally, as Richard Godden points out, the poem includes a recurring "tension between bodies and objects, and between wholeness and fragmentation" ("Prosthetic Ecologies" 1274). The materiality of the body and the things the knight uses becomes blurred. One of these is his own armour which is described as "a strayte cote fun stregth, that stek on his sides / "a straight coat sat tight to his sides" (*SGGK* 152, Neilson 4). The coat almost merges with the knight's body and functions as a tool in his performance of an idealised masculine knighthood. Godden accentuates that the knight's armour appears indistinguishable from a knight's body as a "second skin" (1273). In the context of knighthood, Danielle Westerhof's observes that "character, or interiority, was thought

to manifest itself within and upon the physical body in the perception of aristocratic identity in the thirteenth century" (4). Thus, Westerhof here links medieval aristocratic of identity to notions of sovereignty.[6] This reading emphasises sovereignty not as an immaterial notion but as one that is tied to the materiality of bodies and the control of such 'things.' For a Medieval setting, the identity of the knight is constructed by the objects that he associates himself with; the things he owns, the weapons he bears, the colour of his clothes, everything is 'meaningful' in this context. I thus argue that the GK's merging with his armour acts as a mesh of objects, a unification of medieval aristocratic knighthood with the body.

The GK is particularly relevant for critical study due to the political-body-thing network constructed by Morgan to disrupt the Arthurian court. The influence of Morgan's magical abilities is evident when the GK loses his head (after the axe strike by Gawain) and picks it back up. The description of the length and the focus on the head can be re-aligned with the description of the GK himself, who appears taller than the Arthurian knights "by the hede and more" / "by a head and more" (*SGGK* 333, 8). The emphasis on the head is an extension of the recurring head-motif throughout the poem that reflects the Cartesian divide between mind (head) and body. However, since Morgan in fact controls the GK's body, the mind (head) appears disempowered while the body assumes an agency as a thing. The fragmentation of the GK's body by beheading is the well-known outcome of the beheading game initiated by Morgan.[7] The GK offers his axe as a reward to any who strike him, as long as he may return the strike after a year and a day. Sir Gawain offers to fight him as he humbly considers himself as "the wakkest," / "the weakest" (*SGGK* 354, Neilson 8). Gawain attempts to embody the knightly virtue of humility and volunteers to carry out the first strike with the Knight's precious axe. As a thing, the axe takes on the role of a facilitator of corporeal play upon the body. Cohen makes a crucial observation concerning the Knight's decapitation scene: "(C)utting something off will not extract it from entanglement" (1, 2019). The manner in which the head retains agency after its separation from the body can be challenged by a New Materialist reading as it refocuses on the entanglement of objects such as the physical body and the axe. The axe itself takes on a meaning of its on as a tool, revealing the networks of agency surrounding it, including Gawain as an agent who strikes the GK. The axe thus reveals the GK's body-as-thing by splitting it into two separate yet entangled entities, the head and trunk of the body.

The GK's body is first fragmented and 'othered' when the knight readies himself for Gawain's axe strike by uncovering his flesh (Neilson 9). The emphasis lies here on the carnal and the nakedness of the flesh, a recurring motif throughout the tale. In a grotesque, animalistic description, the blade of the axe cuts through the GK's spine and his "fayre hede fro the halce hit to the erthe" / "fair head fell from the neck to the earth" (427, Neilson 10). The reunion of the head with the earth echoes the representation of the GK as 'natural' and accentuates the head's consideration as a thing that returns to the realm of materiality. The poem evokes this emphasis on the earthly again with the description of the Arthurian knights' new game of a gruesome "head-soccer" which entails hitting the severed head with their feet (*SGGK* 428, Neilson 10). The fragmented body thus reveals the social response of the court as indignant and flawed. Westerhof observes that the aristocratic treatment of bodies and their burial as more "than an act of piety; it also was a confirmation of

one's status in society" (Westerhof 8). Culturally, the court demonstrates a disrespect towards the deceased body and the GK's status as a knight. Their treatment of the head as a material object or *tool* demonstrates the objectification of the GK and their desire to demonstrate superiority over him even though he is already dead. In this cruel game, the GK's head assumes a new agency by becoming the corpses' remnant that is wondrously making itself active again by becoming a 'play-*thing*.'

Further, the corpse of the GK gushes blood everywhere, overwhelming his verdant attire (Neilson 10). The blood interrupts here the (un)natural greenness of the GK's attire and signifies the violent treatment of the Arthurian knights. The Knight begins to "brayde his bulk about / That ugly body that bled" / "turned his trunk about / That ugly body that bled" (440-441, Neilson 10). As a shocking surprise for the Arthurian knights, the mobility of his body has not ceased to function, it has not been affected by the beheading. The poem relates how the GK "nawther faltered ne fel the free never the helder" / "never faltered nor fell the hero for all that (430, Neilson 10). Instead, his body does not fall but jumps back up on his feet (433, Neilson 10). The GK subsequently holding his own head by the hair emphasises the enmeshment of things once again and contrasts the prior treatment of the head as a tool by revealing himself as still a 'subject.' Following his bodily resurrection, his severed head comes back to life as well. "[H]it lyfte up the yghe-lyddez" / "it lifted up the eyelids" and his "muthe" / "mouth" began to speak again to remind Gawain of his promise to receive the GK's axe strike at the promised time (*SGGK* 446-447, Neilson 10). The GK appears marvellously resurrected due to Morgan's puppetry and demonstrates that she – like the court – turns the knight into an object with debatable agency. In so doing, Morgan thereby points out the irony of the position of the knights at the Arthurian court as things by indicating that they act as puppets to their sovereigns, unable to make independent decisions.

Another key object that exemplifies the entanglement of things and magic in the poem is the enchanted girdle that Lady Bertilak offers to Gawain. Lady Bertilak promises that the girdle or sash will protect Gawain from being injured. Gawain accepts the girdle despite breaking his promise to Lord Bertilak that he will be truthful about his promise and due to the dishonourable acceptance, he does not lose his head. The green girdle functions here as a non-magical, performative thing. However, in contrast of being magical, I interpret the girdle as a thing of disenchantment. Jane Bennett in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010) suggests: "The figure of enchantment points in two directions: the first toward the humans who feel enchanted and whose agentic capacities may be thereby strengthened, and the second toward the agency of the things that produce (helpful, harmful) effects in human and other bodies" (xii). Even though it is disenchanted, the girdle still resides within the entanglement of things surrounding the GK in the narrative. In fact, it is the overall entanglement of this poem which Dinshaw suggests "defies all our most treasured and consoling ideas of human wholeness, unity, and sovereignty" (359-360). The girdle thus disrupts such ideas or beliefs of sovereignty. This disruption becomes further emphasised by the revelation of the girdle's non-magical qualities. When Gawain discovers that the emptiness of the faith he put into the girdle as a magical object, it also indicates that the empty promise reveals the belief in the marvellous or immaterial as empty and misleading.

As OOO indicates, everything can be a thing, not only humans but also bodies and abstract concepts. Instead of things, Bennett uses the designation of active agents which "can be human or not, or, most likely, a combination of both" (9). Accordingly, her observations contribute to breaking down human/non-human and object/subject as well as object/body binaries. Two non-human objects, the axe and the holly-branch, highlight this marvellous aspect furthermore. In interpretation, *things* like these tend to be overlooked or pushed aside due to their apparent inertness. The poem introduces the axe however as magical when it is first described as a "spetos spathe to expoun in spelle, quasi myght. / The lenkthe of an elynyerde the large hede hade" / "a weapon merciless almost beyond description; the head had the vast length of an ellyard" (*SGGK* 209-210, Neilson 5). The depiction of the axe as a weapon "beyond description" reflects how we can never understand an object in its own ontological terms. The emphasis lies here on the extraordinary length of the axe, its large head, and its merciless qualities. The poem introduces the axes thus as an immensely material agent that through the GK's intimate connection also functions as a symbol of his knighthood identity. However, it can also be approached as an object in its own terms. The axe features "al bigraven with grene in gracious werke" / "rich embroidered buttons of the bright green" which underlines the axe's intricate artisanship, while evoking an unnatural, bright greenness once more (216, Neilson 6).[8] The depiction of the axe equally underscores its relation to being a manufactured thing, thus finding itself between, as Lightsey argues, an "objectified instrumentality and ambiguous, autonomous potentiality" (24). The axe can also be re-evaluated by its gift-giving function, an aspect that illustrates its workings as a tool. It is crucial that Gawain keeps the original axe as proof of the "mervayl" / "marvel" where the marvellous here entails the arrival of the GK, the beheading game, and his magical resurrection (*SGGK* 480, Neilson 10). The axe thus serves as a materialised reminder of the abstract ritual and broader immaterial promise that Gawain makes. It becomes "an active, earthy, not-quite-human capaciousness," a quality that Bennett designates as "vibrant matter" (3). Bennett's concept of matter or "thing-power" designates the "vitality intrinsic to materiality" (13; 3). The author highlights the connection of all things to life; all of them entangled in a mesh of materiality. Bennett's vital materialism gives new meanings to things, bodies, and personhood and helps us to expand our selves with a "shared materiality" of all things (13). Similarly, the poem presents the axe and holly-branch as part of the GK's body-as-thing and in fact, it is their entanglement with his body, which make him come *alive* as a character.

For instance, the holly-branch as a vital thing also reveals Morgan's goal to present the court as performative, immature, weak and reliant upon a construction of violent masculinity. Upon entering the court, the GK holds in his hand "a holyn bobbe, / That is greatest in grene when grevez ar bare" / "a holly twig, that is greenest when groves are bare" (*SGGK* 207-208, Neilson 5). The attribution of the branch with an unnatural greenness in the depth of winter, disrupts material expectations for the court and the poem's audience. Cohen adds that the branch would carry red berries, which can be read as a reiteration of "Gawain's blood on the Green Chapel snow" but also a foreshadowing of the GK's gushing blood following his beheading (12, 2019). James Winny associates the axe and the holly bob to "merry-making," "blood-sacrifice," and as a revival of "human licentiousness" (142). The aberrant materiality of the branch draws attention to the indulgent behaviour of the Arthurian court and casts the court members as unnatural actors, due to their engagement in lewdness and

over-indulgence. Overall, the axe and the holly-branch turn out to be intentional tools in Morgan's plot to reveal the court's underlying violence. In contrast to the upcoming bloodshed, the GK also stresses the peaceful attributes of his holly-branch: "Ye may be seker bi this braunch that I were here / That I passes as in pes, and no plyght seche"/ "by this branch that I bear here that I pass in peace and seek no quarrel" (*SGGK* 265-266, Neilson 6). Here he may seem to announce his peaceful intention, when, in reality the branch becomes part of Morgan's deception. Although the object itself does not intend to be deceptive, Morgan instructs the GK to use the branch to fool the court into believing he has peaceful intentions. Due to the semantic associations of the branch, the court aligns itself with the object, demonstrating a dependence of believing in the peaceful symbolism of the branch. In this sense, the branch occupies the same place as the girdle because it illuminates the trust of Arthurian knights into objects that bear magical or ideological meaningful qualities when they are in fact part of a deceptive network of things.

Addressing Materiality, Knighthood and the Forest in the Mesh of Things

The network of things is central to the poem. As a conclusion of this interrogation of the GK as tool-being, this analysis will thus address the notion of 'mesh.' When considering the role of knighthood, sovereignty and unnaturalness, the holly-branch is significant as it is an indication of the 'natural' space of the medieval forest, representing the external world meshing with the artificial world of the court. I contrast the concept of the forest to Michel Foucault's and Giorgio Agamben's notion of biopolitics which assumes that the sovereign controls the forest and, as Karl Steel notes, "demonstrates his supreme position by killing" forest animals ("Biopolitics in the Forest" 35). Thus, the sovereign *claims* to be supreme in the forest and aims to be the master of life and death in his realm. However, the forest resists complete control since the animals and plants have their own agencies and are meaningful things in their own right.

In a further step, I relate this evocation of the marvellous to the inherently magical qualities of the axe as symbolising an otherworldly thing. Since Morgan le Fay controls the axe it represents the empty illusion of the marvellous and highlights Gawain's naivety and immaturity. As while the axe may seem to have agency it is actually another tool in her machinations to undermine the sovereign power of King Arthur. In a similar manner, Morgan controls the artificially constructed GK. Since the holly branch appears eerily green in the time of winter, the poem foregrounds its natural/unnatural state. Like the forest, the branch conveys the idea of the natural when it is in fact artificially or magically manufactured by the puppeteer Morgan who introduces the disruption into the court through the object. This small exploration into the Medieval forest and its meaning in relation to the branch demonstrated that, once more, not all objects appear passive. From a New Materialist perspective, they are part of a mesh of things that furthers Morgan's plan.

Further, the apparent connection between the branch and the system of the forest reflects what Timothy Morton in *The Ecological Thought* (2010) describes as "the thinking of interconnectedness" (7-8). Similar to Bennett, Morton observes that all life is intertwined in an entangled mesh that thrives on a vast "ecological thought" (3). This concept describes a progressive

ecology that imagines a vast, global, and dislocated enmeshment of living and non-living things (28). OOO and Morton's approach thus influence and enrich each other by both addressing the decentred mesh of "people, places and things" (Dinshaw 353). In contrast to Morton, my approach to the poem is not one of ecocriticism but mainly of the consideration of the larger readings of the poem regarding the relationships between things and bodies.

Indeed, Dinshaw describes the GK as a "whole green package – human, animal, vegetable" (356). In contrast, I argue that the GK only *seems* natural, when he is in fact an unnatural, engineered *thing*. His body-as-thing becomes a combination of different elements within itself. The GK only seems like a human-nature creature. Through an ecocritical lens, Dinshaw asserts "the plant-man creature here illustrates the radical interconnectedness of all created things" (350). However, I argue that the GK is indeed *anti-natural* and resists an attempt to split the world into "*human* and *nature*" (Bogost 4, original emphasis). By appearing at Arthur's court, the GK indeed challenges a binary, anthropocentric reading of the world into human and nature and challenges the very meaning of the word 'natural' for the present knights.

Through a New Materialist reading, the GK challenges such dualisms as "truth and falsehood, agency and structure, human and nonhuman, before and after, knowledge and power, context and content, materiality and sociality, activity and passivity" by focusing on *relationality* and liminality (Hodder 22-23). His apparent superhuman strength accentuates his non-humanness: "Hit seemed as no mon might / Under his dynttez dryghe" / "It seemed as if no man could endure under his blows" (*SGGK* 201-202, Neilson 5). The poem further underlines his strength and liminality since he is wearing no helmet and no steel shoes, no armour that protects his neck; "no schafte ne no schelde to schwa ne to smyte" / "nor shaft nor shield to guard or to smite" (*SGGK* 205, Neilson 5, Winny 142). It is interesting to note that the GK's strength is *not* associated with materiality or things like armour or steel shoes. Since Bertilak/the GK enmeshes and overcomes binaries this observation further serves to emphasise his in-betweenness and evokes questions about his 'nature.' This super-human representation of his invulnerable body demonstrates his connection and dependency to the magic of Morgan Le Fay as his master furthermore. Consequently, this supernatural aspect of his body appears as part of the knighthood performativity that Morgan initiates and accentuates the liminal state of his body.

As this investigation into the agency of the GK's body-as-thing demonstrates, the magical and the *thing* complement and relate to each other, emphasising that an analysis of object-relations can assist in critically departing from anthropocentric human-object-relation readings. Moreover, the GK can be re-assessed as a *tool* that Morgan Le Fay employs to achieve her own agency. While Cohen observes the "interwoven, veering, and tenacious *heres* inextricable from bodies, climate, atmosphere, the *eros* and flourishing of plant, animal, stone" in the poem, this investigation has also shown the importance of focusing on the object as a meaningful thing in its own right rather than purely enmeshed with other systems (2019 2, original emphasis). The object remains important both as an individual and in a collective approach. Morgan Le Fay's role should not be side-lined when analysing *SGGK* but rather it is crucial in relation to the meaning of things in the poem, such

as the GK's head, girdle, axe, holly-branch and the overall performativity of knighthood that Morgan is critiquing. In a move away from anthropocentrism, this investigation has shown the relevance of a New Materialist approach to *SGGK* by analysing the role of objects in the text. As often overlooked features, this inquiry into the role of things offers a reconsideration between material and immaterial actors while critiquing perspectives of agentic behaviour. I argue that it is crucial to continue investigating the enmeshment of human and non-human things in critical close readings of literary works, to access the "enchanted" realm of materiality studies.

NOTES

1. I will primarily refer to James Winny's translation of the poem but will also draw upon W. A. Neilson's more modern translation where relevant. Cotton MS Nero's website offers a lightly edited edition of the whole manuscript. The poem has proven to be the source of ongoing popular imagination as exemplified by David Lowery's recent film adaptation (2021).

2. See works by Robert J. Blanch and Julian N. Wasserman, Steven Bruso, Richard H. Godden, Sara M. Pons-Sanz, Ad Putter, Iris Ralph, Gillian Rudd and Cicilia A. Hatt, respectively.

3. Bill Brown coined the phrase "Thing Theory" in an essay that discusses things in the context of human-object interactions to investigate what they disclose about society, history, culture, and nature (4). I similarly look at things to investigate the GK's body-as-thing and its relationship to its surroundings.

4. Bogost elaborates his definition: "[T]hings are usually taken either as the aggregation of ever smaller bits (scientific naturalism) or as constructions of human behavior and society (social relativism) […] OOO steers a path between the two" (6).

5. Morgan Le Fay initiates the shapeshifting – a process which implies the malleability to objects based on human or actant's desires. In *Persons and Things* (2010), Barbara Johnson makes a crucial observation: "Under the spell of shape-changing, anything can become anything at any moment […] The relation between persons and things grows more uncanny" (5).

6. Similarly, Crane defines medieval clothing as a symbolic medium of "material self-presentation in social performance" (2002, 15).

7. Beheading games are a well-known trope that can be found in medieval narratives as Sheri Ann Strite emphasises in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: To Behead or Not to Behead-That Is a Question" (1).

8. Cohen also observes that the GK "enmeshes the vegetal and animal, leaf and silk, tendril and embroidery, works of nature and artisans" (12, 2019).

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BIONOTE

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