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NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

A Note on Bertilak's Beard

Michael J. Curley

The reception accorded Gawain at the “bone hostel” of fit 2 of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is all that hospitality should be toward a knight of his stature, a proper balance of reverence and ardor. As he is being comforted by the fiercely blazing hearth, the lord of the manor enters to welcome his guest and to assure him that the entire estate is at his disposal. The poet describes the host in words which are somewhat more than faintly reminiscent of those used to portray the “grene gome” who had turbulently disrupted the yuletide festivities of King Arthur’s court one year before. While the description leaves the reader with little doubt that the Green Knight of fit 1 and the host of fit 2 are one and the same, in one significant detail the portraits differ: the “gome” is no longer “grene.” On the other hand, the host’s appearance is not altogether lacking in remarkable chromatic detail:

Gawayn glyȝt on þe gome þat godly hym gret,
And þuȝt hit a bolde burne þat þe burȝ aȝte,
A hoge haþel for þe nonez, and of hyghe eldee;
Brode, bryȝt, watz his berde, and al beuer-hwed,
Sturne, stif on þe stryþþe on stalworth schonkez,
Felle face as þe fyre, and fre of hys spece . . .

[Lines 842–47]¹

The exact significance of the host’s broad, bright, and beaver-hued beard seems to have escaped the ken of modern readers; to a moderately literate fourteenth-century audience, however, the mention of a beaver-hued beard might have stimulated certain conventional associations having very little to do with coloration. Although other examples of beaver-hued beard and hair can be found in Middle English alliterative poetry,² only the *Gawain* poet appears to have adopted the descriptive convention with full awareness of its rich suggestiveness for his particular story. The aim of this note is to elucidate the general content of those associations and to suggest how the poet might have intended to exploit them for their rhetorical possibilities.

The reader of Apuleius’ *The Golden Ass* will recall the exquisite punishment contrived by the hag Meroe for one of her unfaithful lovers, namely, to transform him into a beaver whose practice it was to castrate itself when pursued by hunters: “Amatorem suum, quod in aliam temerasset, unico verbo mutavit in feram castorem, quod ea bestia captivitati metuens ab insequentibus se praecisione genitalium liberat, ut illi quoque simile, quod venerem habuit in aliam prove-

1/All references to *GK* in this essay are to Tolkien and Gordon’s edition (Oxford, 1930) (2d ed. by Norman Davis [Oxford, 1967]).

2/In particular, see “The Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Wathelyne,” in *Scottish Alliterative Poems in Riming Stanzas*, ed. F. J. Amours, Scottish Text Society, vol. 21 (Edinburgh and London, 1897), line 357; and “*Morte Arthure*” or the “*Death of Arthur*,” ed. Edmund Brock, Early English Text Society, O.S., vol. 8 (repr. London, 1898), line 3630.

niret.”³ Juvenal also alludes to the beaver’s self-castration in satire 12 when he compares the prudence of Catullus’ jettisoning his worldly possessions from the storm-tossed ship to the beaver’s leaving his much-prized testicles to his pursuers in exchange for his life:

Accidit et nostro similis fortuna Catullo
Cum plenus fluctu foret alveus et iam,
Alternum puppis latus evertentibus undis,
Arbori incertae, nullan prudentia cani
Rectoris cum ferret opem, decidere iactu
Coepit cum ventis, imitatus castora, qui se
Eunuchum ipse facit cupiens evadere damno
Testiculi; adeo medicatum intellegit inguen.⁴

Reference to the beaver’s extreme behavior *in periculo mortis* can also be found in Ovid’s *Nux elegia*, Pliny’s *Natural History*, and Solinus’ *Collectanea rerum memorabilium*.⁵ Like Juvenal, Aelian recognized the moral dimensions of the old story, for in his book *On the Characteristics of Animals* he compares the beaver’s prudence to that of the rich man who, having fallen into the hands of robbers, forfeits his goods to his antagonists as ransom for his life.⁶

In the hands of Christian allegorists, of course, the beast lore of the ancients, already deeply infused with moral wisdom, was transformed into a didactic vehicle used to illustrate specific biblical texts and to enhance the rhetorical force of sermons. Once a symbol of the Roman ideal of the prudent man, the beaver soon acquired for a Christian audience an allegorical significance as the type of man who renounces the sins of the world and the flesh and pays them in tribute to the devil for his spiritual freedom. Such a transformation can be illustrated by the version of the story as told in the ever-popular *Physiologus*:

Est animal quod dicitur castor, mansuetum nimis, cuius testiculi in medicina proficiunt ad diuersas ualetudines. Physiologus exposuit naturam eius dicens quia, cum inuestigauerit eum uenator, sequitur post eum; castor uero, cum respixerit post se et uiderit uenatorem uenientem post se, statim morsu abscondit testiculos suos, et proicit eos ante faciem uenatoris, et sic fugiens euadit; uenator autem ueniens colligit eos, et ultra iam non persequitur eum, sed recedit ab eo. Si autem rursus euenerit ut alter uenator perquirens inueniat et sequatur post eum, ille, uidens se iam euadere non posse, erigit se et demonstrat uirilia sua uenatori; uenator autem cum uiderit eum non habere testiculos, discedit ab eo.

Sic et omnis qui secundum mandatum dei conuersantur, et caste uult uiuere, abscondit a se omnia uitia et omnis impudicitiae actus, et proiciat post se in faciem diaboli; tunc ille, uidens eum nihil suorum habentem, confusus discedit ab eo. Ille uero uiuit in deo et non capitur a diabolo qui dicit: Persequens comprehendam eum [Ps. 17:38]. Nihil igitur diaboli homo dei habere debet, ut fisus cum domino dicere audeat: Uenit princeps mundi huius, et in me non inuenit quicquam [Ioh. 14:30]. Monet enim nos apostolus et dicit: Reddite omnibus debita, cui tributum tributum, cui uectigal uectigal,

3/Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, Loeb Classical Library (London, 1958), p. 16.

4/Juvenal *Sat.* 12. 29–36.

5/See Ovid, “*The Art of Love*” and *Other Poems*, Loeb Classical Library (London, 1929), p. 246; and C. Plini Secundi “*Naturalis Historiae*” *Libri XXXVII*, ed. Carl Mayhoff (Stuttgart, 1967), 7:30, 47. Pliny’s remarks on the peculiar behavior of the beaver are free from moral interpretation. He states: “easdem partes sibi ipsi Pontici amputant fibri periculo urgente, ob hoc se petignari” (*C. Iulii Solini Collectanea Rerum Memorabilium*, ed. Th. Mommsen [Berlin, 1895], p. 81).

6/See Aelian, *On the Characteristics of Animals*, Loeb Classical Library (London, 1959), 2:50.

cui timorem timorem, cui honorem honorem [Rom. 13:7]. In primis ergo diabolo reddantur quae sua sunt, hoc est renuntians illi et omnibus operibus eius malis; tunc demum ex toto corde conuersus ad deum, reddes illi honorem tamquam patri, et timorem tanquam domino. Et separa te opera carnis, quod est uectigal et tributum diaboli; et adipiscamur fructus spiritalis, id est: Caritatem, gaudium, pacem, patientiam, bonitatem, fidem, mansuetudinem, continentiam, castitatem in operibus bonis, id est in elemosinis, in uisitacionibus infirmorum, in curis pauperum, in laudibus dei, in orationibus, in gratiarum actione, et caeteris qui dei sunt.⁷

Note especially that in *Physiologus* the beaver's action serves as an *exemplum* reinforcing Paul's text on the repayment of debts: "Reddite omnibus debita." The debts owed to the devil are "omnia uitia et omnis impudicitiae actus."

The allegorical interpretation of the beaver's self-castration as established by *Physiologus* became widely known during the late Middle Ages partly through such versified bestiaries as those of Philippe de Thaün and Guillaume Le Clerc.⁸ Also, erudite poet-philosophers such as Bernardus Silvestris and Alanus ab Insulis adorned their compilations with illustrations of the beaver's strange custom, as did the popular encyclopedists.⁹ Even the rigorous attacks on the

7/"*Physiologus Latinus*": *Editions préliminaires, versio B*, ed. Francis Carmody (Paris, 1939), pp. 32–33. For a slightly briefer version, see "*Physiologus Latinus*," *versio Y*, ed. Francis Carmody, University of California Publications in Classical Philology, vol. 12, no. 7 (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1941), pp. 128–29.

8/See Philippe de Thaün, "*Le bestiaire*": *texte critique*, ed. Emmanuel Walberg (Geneva, 1970), pp. 43–44; and "*Le bestiaire*": *Das Tierbuch des normannischen Dichters Guillaume le Clerc*, ed. Robert Reinsch (Leipzig, 1892), pp. 286–90. Philippe de Thaün's version shows the influence of *Physiologus*'s allegorization:

Aiez en remembrance
C'est grant signefiance.
Castor en cest vie
Saint ume signefie
Ki luxure guerpist
E le pechié qu'il fist,
Al diable le lait
Ki pur ço mal li fait.
Quant diable at tempté
Saint ume e espruvé
Ne mal n'i pot truver,
Lores le laisse ester,
E li om od Dé vit,
Si cum mustre l'escrit;
E tel signefiance
Castor fait senz dutance.
N'en voil or plus traitier,
D'altre voil cumencier.

[Lines 1159–76]

For a comic twist to the orthodox interpretation of the beaver's self-mutilation, see the lover's complaint in "*Le bestiaire D'Amour Rime*," *poème inédit du xiii^e siècle*, ed. Arvid Thordstein (Copenhagen, 1941), pp. 64–65.

9/See Bernardus Silvestris *de Mundi Universitate Libri Duo sive Megacosmus et Microcosmus*, ed. Carl Sigmund-Barach and Johann Wrobel (Frankfurt, 1964), p. 22; Alain de Lille, *The Complaint of Nature*, trans. Douglas Moffat (Hamden, Conn., 1972), prose 1, pp. 16–17; *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi Etymologiarum sive Originum Libri XX*, ed. W. M. Lindsay (Oxford, 1941), 12, ii, 21–22, and 20, xxvii, 4; *Vincentius Bellovacensis (Vincent de Beauvais) Speculum Quadruplex sive Speculum Maius: Speculum Naturale* (Duai, 1624), bk. 12, chap. 27, col. 1399, and chap. 30, cols. 1399–1400; Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *De proprietatibus rerum* (Nurnberg, 1492), 11, iii, and 32, iii; and Pseudo-Hugh of Saint Victor, "*De Bestiis*" *et Aliis Rebus*, Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, 178:61. On the beaver as an example of the synthesis of two natures, see the preaching manual contained in British Museum MS Harley 7322, esp. fol. 106.

vulgar notion of animal behavior from such exponents of the experimental method as Albertus Magnus and Roger Bacon provide eloquent testimony to the tenacity of belief in the old story.¹⁰ Alexander Neckam, who appears to have rejected the scientific validity of the age-old notion on the authority of natural philosophers (“qui fidelius in naturis rerum instruuntur”), nevertheless heartily endorsed its useful moral application:

Imitetur castorem castus esse desiderans, et materiam voluptatum obscaenarum dente discretionis praecidat. O quot sunt occasiones, quot incitamenta, quae ad titillantes illecebrarum pruritus nos invitant. O quot nobis praetendit laqueos fallaciae antiquus ille robustus venator Membroth. Non debet quis membra pudoris realiter abscidere. Originis enim factum in hac parte non est ad consequentiam trahendum. Castrare nos spiritualiter debemus propter regnum coelorum, ut non solum lumbos cingulo abstinentiae cingamus, sed et pectus aereo cingulo continentiae voluntarie ornemus.¹¹

Given the widespread and consistent use of the beaver as a symbolic beast, would it be too farfetched to suggest that the mention of Bertilak’s peculiar beard might have evoked some of these common associations in the minds of the *Gawain* poet’s contemporary audience? As Gawain stands before the blazing hearth and faces his host with the beaver-hued beard, the audience becomes aware that a very special sort of testing is about to ensue and that a moral challenge has superseded a physical one, just as a sturdy hunter (“ille robustus venator Membroth”) has replaced an awesome green giant. As the subsequent temptations unfold, the audience knowingly observes the snare being set to catch Gawain’s soul; and not surprisingly, the snare is that temptation from which the beaver’s supposed behavior allows it to escape, namely, impurity (the “impudicitiae actus” of *Physiologus*). The question of the hero’s ability to pay his debt (“reddite omnibus debita”) to his host-pursuer by cutting himself off from all varieties of sin (“castrare nos spiritualiter debemus propter regnum coelorum”) is thus raised by the mention of Bertilak’s beard at the beginning of fit 2 and thereafter becomes the poem’s dominant moral problem. If Gawain will be able to perform the act of excising himself from sin, there will be no need to receive Bertilak’s blow.

Ironically, of course, Gawain himself remains unaware of the new dimension of his challenge. Increasingly preoccupied with the thought of the approaching threat to his mortal life, Gawain fails to perceive the immediate peril to his immortal soul. The fact that he manages nevertheless to resist the adulterous

10/See *Albertus Magnus de Animalibus Libri XXVI*, ed. Herman Stadler, *Beiträger zur Geschichte der Philosophie des Mittelalters*, vol. 16 (Munich, 1916), p. 1370; and *The Opus Maius of Roger Bacon*, ed. John Henry Bridges (Frankfurt/Main, 1964), 1:168–69. Note that Albertus rejected the beaver’s self-castration: “Falsum enim est quod agitur a venatore castret seipsum dentibus et proicit castorem et quod si alia vice castratus exagitur, erigendo se ostendat castores se carere sicut frequentissime in partibus nostris est compertum.”

11/*Alexandri Neckam “De Naturis Rerum Libri Duo,”* ed. Thomas Wright, *Rolls Series*, no. 34 (London, 1863), pp. 220–21. Neckam’s language echoes Matt. 19:12: “et sunt eunuchi, qui seipso castraverunt propter regnum caelorum. Qui potest capere, capita.” For conventional exegesis on this passage as an exhortation to chastity, see Rupertus Tuitiensis, “*De Trinitate et operibus ejus, in Deuteronomia*, Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 167:941–42. “Membroth” is, of course, a variant spelling of “Nimrod,” who, like Bertilak, was a great hunter of men. For the spelling “Membroth,” see *Aurora Petri Rigae Biblia Versificata: A Verse Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Paul E. Beichner, *Publications in Medieval Studies*, University of Notre Dame, no. 19, pt. 1 (Notre Dame, Ind., 1965), p. 54, n. 688.

blandishments of his host's wife and to repay his daily quota of amorous tokens indicates how clearly the poet understood that momentous moral choices are often made *en passant*, as it were, while the mind is shrouded in a mist of worldly worries. In not returning the green baldric to its rightful owner, however, Gawain falls somewhat short of the complete renunciation of "omnia uitia" (as did the beaver) and thereby becomes ensnared in the net of cupidity:

"Lo ! lord," quop þe leude, and þe lace hondeled,
 "þis is þe bende of þis blame I bere in my neck,
 þis is þe laþe and þe losse þat I laȝt haue
 Of couardise and couetyse þat I haf caȝt þare;
 þis is þe token of untrawþe þat I am tan inne,
 And I mot nedeȝ hit were wyle I may last."

[Lines 2505–10]

The final encounter with Bertilak is fulfilling in two respects: first, it remains for Bertilak to complete symbolically the act of excision left incomplete by Gawain's excessive attachment to his mortal life; second, the unity of knowledge between the character and the audience is finally established when Gawain himself learns what the audience knew at the beginning of fit 2, namely, that this New Year's challenge was an invitation to become a new man free of all vices whatsoever.

Bertilak's nicking Gawain in the neck becomes necessary, as J. A. Burrow points out, as a penance for and a reminder of his fault, but could it not also be that the nick ties up a certain thematic thread? Bertilak, as I have pointed out, has earned his emblematic beard by voluntarily, even jocularly, surrendering his life with full confidence in his rebirth; his confraternity is indeed a small and elite one whose rites of initiation demand the utmost sacrifice before the neophyte is awarded the emblem of the order. While Gawain, therefore, fails to "wound" himself by renouncing the greatest of worldly desires, his wish to preserve his mortal life, the surgical duty shifts to Bertilak, who is eminently qualified for the task. Readers who perceive in the poem an undercurrent of archetypal sexual struggle between father and son might make much of the associations connected with the castration metaphor. In any case, having failed to complete his ticklish moral surgery with his own invisible tooth of discretion (to use Alexander Neckam's apt phrase), our near-perfect young knight must humble himself before the whimsical "grene gome" and submit to a blow from a far less delicate edge. If only Gawain had nicked himself free from his attachment to his life by surrendering the baldric to Bertilak, this final humiliating scene would have been unnecessary. Our young hero returns home profoundly chagrined and full of self-recrimination at his failure to enter the order of the perfect.

Shame on those who think evil of Gawain for his failure!

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