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Them's Flyting Words: The Boundaries of Acceptable Affronts in Medieval Poetry

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Peer Review

This work has undergone a double-blind review by a minimum of two faculty members from institutions of higher learning from around the world. The faculty reviewers have expertise in disciplines closely related to those represented by this work. If possible, the work was also reviewed by undergraduates in collaboration with the faculty reviewers.

Abstract

The boundaries between verbal arguments and physical retribution are complicated and difficult to directly identify. This paper examines the points at which verbal sparring, conventionally dubbed "flyting," turns to physical altercations. In identifying these points in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" and "The Wife of Bath's Prologue," I find that rhetoric turns to violence after affronts to particular morality-based identities. In my reading of "Sir Gawain," I posit that the eponyms' flyte and subsequent fight in the fourth fitt represent an attack on both the institution of King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table and on Sir Gawain's personhood. In Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath," I suggest a reading wherein the violence between Allison and Janekin represents a fight against the rhetoric of oppression. Throughout the essay, I show how physical retribution is, in these texts, an excusable method of defense against language, particularly when personal and political senses of honor are verbally attacked.

Keywords

English literature, medieval poetry, violence, Chaucer, Wife of Bath, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

English court documents from 1312 illuminate a murder case where, on Palm Sunday, a man, William, invited another man, Stephen, into his home. William's wife, unnamed, invited Stephen to spend Easter with them. Stephen, for some reason, proceeded to call her "vile and a mistress as well of the chaplain" (Hall 130). At this, William and his wife urged Stephen to leave. Instead, he hid in the bushes outside of their house, and when William left to run errands, Stephen "rushed at him . . . William then struck [Stephen] and Stephen was killed" (Hall 130). William was found not guilty of murder.

The line between insults and violence is thin. The latter often follows the former, especially in medieval English poetry. The point at which words turn to weapons are under constant negotiation when there are greater political and gendered implications at play. In this essay, I examine the moments at which flyting, verbal sparring with specific poetic conventions, turns into physical blows in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" and "The Wife of Bath's Prologue" from *The Canterbury Tales*. In doing so, I find the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable rhetoric—points where words require physical responses—in two different social contexts. I argue that these boundaries are liminal spaces, that they are constantly negotiated when considering the political as separated from the gendered connotations in battles of wits. Loyalty, chastity, and bodies are all implicated at the moments where words, the realm of rhetoric, turn to violence, the realm of the physical.

Sir Gawain and the Green Flyte

Verbal violence begets physical violence when institutions, rather than characters, are attacked in early English poetry. For example, Sir Gawain stands in for the Knights of the Round Table, while the Green Knight represents outside groups wishing to test the mettle of King Arthur's knights. The eponyms of "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" clash twice. First, when the Green Knight enters King Arthur's hall and lays down a metaphorical gauntlet, Sir Gawain chops his head off. Later, in the Green Chapel, the Green Knight attacks—both verbally and physically—Sir Gawain. Before any actual physical violence is inflicted upon Sir Gawain, he and the Green Knight spar verbally.

The first physical violence occurs early in the poem, when Gawain strikes his blow upon the Green Knight's neck in King Arthur's court. When Sir Gawain accepts the Green Knight's challenge, he becomes a representative of King Arthur's court, and thus assumes a responsibility that demands that he ignore slights against his person, but also demands fierce retribution against slights towards the court. The second instance of physical blows, where the Green Knight delivers a blow upon Gawain in the Green Chapel, is the conclusion of this cycle of violence. The violence inflicted upon Gawain is a presupposed eventuality. When Gawain accepts the Green Knight's challenge, a new cycle of violence is begun based on violence inflicted on and by institutions—King Arthur's Round Table and the Green Knight's castle. When Gawain seeks out the Green Knight and accepts his role as the receiver of the physical attack, he ends this cycle, keeping "the covenant / agreed in Arthur's hall" (Armitage ll. 2328–29). After Gawain's head is chopped off, any additional violence would be unnecessary. In accepting this retaliation, Gawain concedes sovereignty to the Green Knight, but this physical violence would be incomplete without the battles of boasts that must precede blows.

Before things come to physical blows, the Green Knight insults Sir Gawain's personal sense of courage. Sir Gawain does not respond. This is an intentional dismissal of an insult to his personhood, but when the Green Knight insults Gawain's institution, the Knights of the Round Table, he reacts immediately. The Green Knight claims that Gawain's flinch, and consequential failure to uphold their agreement, marks him a coward. The Green Knight even goes so far as to claim that the stories surrounding Gawain are fictitious or are at the very least exaggerated. He says that the man who flinched from his axe is

not Gawain . . . with his good name,
who faced down every foe in the field of battle

but now flinches with fear at the foretaste of harm.

Never could I hear of such cowardice from that knight. "(Armitage ll. 2270–73)

These lines, and the ones closely following, implicate how and when words turn to violence. From Dianne Hall demonstrates correlations between acts of speech and acts of violence; I borrow the suggestion that physically violent retorts to spoken phrases would not have been considered uncommon in medieval poetry. Hall argues that "the provoking action [in the moments before a bar fight] . . . was uttering words" (122–41). Words, especially insulting words, therefore, could and often did have physically violent retribution. This suggests that it would not have been uncommon, both in and out of medieval poetry, for flyting to devolve into fighting.

Spoken insults arrive in different forms, demanding different responses depending on the target of the insult. As the flyting between the Green Knight and Sir Gawain continues, the Green Knight asks Gawain

Did I budge or even blink when you aimed the axe,
Or carp or quibble in King Arthur's Castle,
Or flap when my head went flying to my feet?
But entirely untouched, you are terror struck.

I'll be found the better fellow, since you were so feeble and frail. (Armitage ll. 2274–79)

Here, the Green Knight insults Sir Gawain's personhood and personal failings rather than the failings of the institution he represents: the Knights of the Round Table and King Arthur himself. Gawain explains himself, claiming that

[he] flinched
at first, but will not fail.
Though once my head's unhitched
it's off once and for all. (Armitage ll. 2280–83)

Even here Gawain does not participate in the acts of goading, he does not flyte with the Green Knight, he instead admits that, while he did flinch, here, he will not do it again. It is another moment of Gawain ignoring insults towards his person against his sense of honor.

In the moment when the Green Knight delivers a false blow to Sir Gawain's neck, he asserts his sovereignty over the other eponym. To use a sports analogy, the Green Knight "pump-fakes" Gawain (i.e., feigns a pass at Gawain's neck with his axe) to show that the knight is at his mercy. Gawain, though, does not retreat. He holds firm, he is "motionless, never [moving] a muscle . . . [standing] stone-still, or as still as a tree stump" (Armitage ll. 2292–93). Gawain's steadfastness proves the Green Knight's previous assertion—that Gawain is unable to face his own potential death—wrong. The Green Knight's physical and verbal actions all revolve around the assumption of Gawain's cowardice, that he is too weak to face his own death without flinching. Gawain, through actions rather than words, disproves the Green Knight's insults. The attacks on Sir Gawain's personal traits such as his courage, his strength, and his failures in such are ignored. This dynamic shifts, though, when the Green Knight begins to attack Gawain's king and comitatus.

When the Green Knight mocks Gawain's state, Gawain is immediately drawn in to the verbal volley. The Green Knight mocks the knighthood placed upon Gawain by King Arthur: "May the honorable knighthood heaped on you by Arthur— / if it proves to be powerful—protect your neck" (Armitage ll. 2296–98). This is the point of no return. The presupposed violence must occur after this particular insult. Gawain, after previously failing his thane, must respond to this insult. This particular "slur drew a spirited response" from Gawain, who tells the Green Knight to "thrash away, then, thug," and that his "threats are hollow. / Such Huffing and fussing— [the Green Knight will] frighten [his] own heart" (Armitage ll. 2296–98). Gawain here participates in the flyting, he has become an active participant in the verbal combat. This suggests that Gawain is not obligated to respond to attacks

against his person, but when the institution that he represents is attacked, he is obligated to respond in kind.

Gawain's retort to the Green Knight is what causes the Green Knight to resort to physical violence. While the Green Knight obviously crosses a line with his insults towards King Arthur, when Gawain responds in kind the Green Knight becomes enraged. In this instance, the inciting act of verbal violence that crosses the threshold of acceptability for the Green Knight is when Gawain doubts the Green Knight's commitment to their agreement. "By God," the Green Knight begins, "there'll be no more shilly-shallying, I shall shatter you, I vow" (Armitage ll. 2301–2302). The Green Knight, in response to Gawain's retort, "stands to strike, a sneer / comes over lip and brow" (Armitage ll. 2305–2306). After which, the Green Knight scratches Gawain's neck with his axe. In their previous dialogue, the Green Knight is content with delivering verbal blow after verbal blow to Gawain, but the moment Gawain returns oral fire the Green Knight resorts to physical violence.

This affront to the power of King Arthur's knights can be extended to a pointed interrogation of the legitimacy of King Arthur's authority to reign more broadly. Consider the first fitt, particularly the lines spoken by the Green Knight after none of King Arthur's comitatus volunteers to fulfill their side of the challenge. The Green Knight declares that "The towering reputation of the Round Table, / skittled and scuppered by a stranger—what a scandal!" (Armitage ll. 313–14). The Green Knight implies that King Arthur and his knights have a reputation in the world of the poem—a reputation that they are here failing to uphold. This reputation is complicated when one considers the implications regarding different types of loyalty (to the individual, to the kingdom) present in these moments of flyting.

Only when the Green Knight insults Gawain's lord does Gawain join the actual battle of wits. Throughout most of the pair's exchange, only the Green Knight participates in the flyting, only the Green Knight insults Gawain. Only when the Green Knight insults Gawain's lord—and by extension, his nation—does Gawain get upset. Gawain has already failed King Arthur once, when he failed to take the challenge until prompted, so it is quite probable that he reacts to the Green Knight's insults towards his lord more immediately than he would to his own personhood in an attempt to regain a sense of self-fulfillment.

The Wife of Bath's Wrath

To complicate an already complex concept, if one expands the definition of flyting from contests between two parties where each party verbally attacks to include any verbal spar broadly, it becomes apparent that additional border negotiations are at play (Flynn and Mitchell 69). In broadening this definition to become more inclusive, I define flyting as any type of verbal duel where two (or more) characters participate in oral conflict of any sort, not necessarily in verse, while still including poetic conventions. Under the traditional definition of flyting, poetic devices such as alliteration, rhyme schemes, word play are highly prized. Under this new definition, which also values Classical allusions and appeals to authority, another border is negotiated: that of the use of rhetorical devices as a means of perpetuating oppression.

These rhetorical devices often have dynamics associated with the power of knowledge and education. In having the prologue told through Allison, Geoffrey Chaucer provides a subversion of traditional power dynamics wherein a woman relates a tale wherein classical allusions are used to oppress her, but she also uses these same allusions to empower her own arguments. While in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," the flyting and physical violence occurred between two male characters, in "The Wife of Bath's Prologue" from *The Canterbury Tales*, the verbal and physical altercation happens between a male and a female character. There are two major moments of intense physical retribution that represent the beginning and end of another cycle of violence. The first, when

Allison takes a page out of Janekin's book (both literally and later figuratively) opens a new cycle of violence. When she retaliates against Janekin's violence by ripping a page out of his book, she asserts a physical dominance over a rhetorical vessel for communications. She shows, literally, that violence can be used as another method of defense against words.

The Classical allusions present in the second instance of violence in the Wife's prologue further complicate the boundary between rhetoric and physical retaliation. Janekin references multiple Classical stories and myths including Hercules and Deianira, Socrates and his two wives, Pasiphae, and Clytemnestra, among others in an effort to show his wife that her actions are harmful to both him and their marriage (Chaucer ll. 730–46). Each of these Classical allusions involve stories of men oppressing or otherwise overpowering their wives. Flynn and Mitchell claim that “in flyting, simple and familiar language is combined with the inventive exploitation of formal rhetorical devices to prove the superiority of one poet over another” (Flynn and Mitchell 69). By referencing these stories, Janekin draws upon prevalent stories to establish a historical and cultural precedence that claims that women should rescind their own sovereignty within their unions. This is further nuanced because Allison has already relented many of her physical belongings to Janekin.

Negotiations of boundaries are not limited to instances where words turn to violence, but also include the boundaries of personal sovereignty. Allison has already, at this point in the prologue, given to Janekin “all the land and fee / That ever was me [given] therbifore” (Chaucer ll. 635–36). Allison has already given up a great deal of her physical possessions—her land, her property, her money—to Janekin, who still wants more from her. He wants to remove her physical autonomy. He attempts to do so by physically striking her, rendering her at least partially deaf, in addition to the other medical complications that come with being struck so hard that Allison's eardrum (presumably) bursts.

Therefore, this argument is not only a type of flyting, but also a subversion of the rhetorical tactic of argumentative language. The Wife of Bath does not respond to any of Janekin's references, insults, or abuse, until she physically strikes him. She remains stoic throughout all of her husband's vitriol. This is not, exactly, flyting, but is rather verbal abuse. Hall's study of flyting, verbal abuse, and the consequences of such manifests a gendered correlation between words and violence. “Women,” Hall states, “are considered to be naturally quarrelsome, their words by definition [are] untrustworthy and capable of disproportionate hurt” (Hall 128). In this poem, however, the Wife of Bath offers no verbal retort. She intentionally does not participate in her husband's flyting. Nor does she react to his goads. Until she does. After Janekin accuses her of being unchaste, she figures that

he wolde nevere [stop]
to reden on this cursed book al night,
Al [suddenly] three leves have I [torn]
Out of his book right as he redde, and eke
I with my fist so took him on the cheeke . . .

That in our fir he [fell] backward adown. (Chaucer ll. 794–98)

She attacks him physically, ripping pages out of the book he is using to oppress her, to insult her. She is here again asserting her sovereignty over her own personhood. The moment that crosses the line between words and weapons for the Wife of Bath is when Janekin insults her for her previous husbands.

Even as the Wife of Bath's actions are a subversion of flyting so too are they a subversion of the oft-feminized concept of peace-weaving, as discussed by Margaret McFarlane in this special issue. Peace-weaving as a concept has its own definitions ranging from advice-giving to mead-pouring. Most generally the term is used to refer to people—most often women—who negotiate peace between two groups (Cavell 359). Therefore, the relationship between Janekin and the Wife of Bath has no real peace-weaver, indeed the peace rapidly unravels between the couple. Janekin's words are the catalyst upon which the Wife of Bath's violence is predicated. In actively performing the violence, the Wife of

Bath is subverting traditional interpretations of women's roles in stories (and, on some level, in relationships). Allison's violence represents an assertion of a woman's autonomy. She physically takes control of her sovereignty against the wishes of her husband. "And yit," she says of her own violence shortly after being physically and verbally abused again, "I hadde geten unto me / by maistrye al the soverinetee" (Chaucer ll. 814–24). While she wins her autonomy, it does take punching her husband's face.

Ending the Cycle

Boundaries are tricky. They are under constant negotiation, always porous. There are tipping points in verbal arguments, points where the only recourse possible *is* violence. These tipping points are different depending on context. Generally, though, they reside at the point in which one party's insults target a set of ingrained morals in the other party. In violence between male characters, the boundary of acceptability depends on the target of the insults. In "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," the eponyms fight with words and with weapons. The tipping point between the two occurs when the celadon chevalier begins to insult his statehood and Gawain is forced to respond in kind. Sir Gawain feels as if he must respond to insults against his institution. In violence that features a man and a woman, the boundaries are less clear. For the Wife of Bath, the tipping point is when Janekin calls into doubt her chastity. At this point, Allison takes a page out of his book—literally and figuratively. She tears leaves from the book he uses to verbally oppress her and slaps him across the face. After this exertion of dominion, Janekin stops trying to assert his authority over his wife. She wins, but at great physical cost.

The sacrifices here are equally as important as the actions themselves. Sir Gawain is ready to sacrifice his life to end the cycle of violence that began for his sovereign, King Arthur. Allison sacrifices part of her hearing, her land, and her wealth in order to maintain her personal sovereignty. Through sacrifice, both gain what they wish. Sir Gawain maintains his loyalty and gains respect from his fellow knights. Allison maintains her own sovereignty and is allowed to continue in her own, radical, ways.

Even contemporarily, a legal precedent for turning flyting into fighting exists. Fighting words, as defined by the Supreme Court of the United States in 1942, are words that "by their very utterance, inflict injury or tend to incite an immediate breach of the peace" (Murphy). This decision has been upheld in multiple cases since 1942. How, though, the words that inflict injury differ when they come from or are directed towards a woman rather than a man, is always under very specific types of negotiation. Where Sir Gawain found insults to his King unpardonable, Allison found insults to her choices and her chastity unforgiveable. While William, in 1312, did kill Stephen, Stephen called William's wife vile first. Words have different types of power and demand different reactions; sometimes verbal discourse must be answered by physical violence.

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