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Stopping in “fly-over country”:
Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the History of Medieval Rhetoric

Medieval poets ... were trained in the liberal arts of grammar and rhetoric in which they learned the use of topics and arguments, the principals of arrangement and amplification, the names and uses of tropes, the figures of speech, the concept of the grand, middle, and plain style, the use of topics and forms of argument, and the conventions of literary genre. To a considerable extent, a work’s ability to apply and vary this teaching ... was what made it seem ‘literary’ to the ears and eyes of medieval audiences.

- George Kennedy, Classical Rhetoric and its Christian and Secular Tradition, 1999

For most historians of rhetoric, the European Middle Ages have been what the American West is for most airline passengers: ‘fly-over country.’

- Martin Camargo, “Defining Medieval Rhetoric,” 2003

In referring to medieval rhetoric as “fly-over country,” Martin Camargo rightly notes the dearth of medieval rhetorical texts available to scholars and students of rhetoric. Few of the textbooks used in history of rhetoric courses spend much time visiting the Middle Ages, that roughly thousand-year period sandwiched between the fall of the Roman Empire and the birth of the European Renaissance (or from about 500 – 1450). As an example, the most recent edition of The Rhetorical Tradition dedicates a mere 123 of its 1,627 pages to medieval rhetoric. Likewise the widely circulated “Survey of Rhetoric” appended to Edward Corbett and Robert Connors’s Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student flatly dismisses medieval rhetoric, saying that “the art of rhetoric stood still, if it actually did not retrogress” during the Middle Ages (498). Such works forward the medieval rhetorical tradition as intellectually insignificant and historically inconsequential.¹

This seeming paucity of the medieval presence is further exacerbated by our contemporary intellectual divides between literature and rhetoric. As Melissa Ianetta argues, it is as if we have mapped the artifice of our contemporary institutional configurations onto a more

organic historical tradition. Scholarly disciplines were not always discrete; indeed, the bifurcation of the rhetorical and literary traditions is a product of current disciplinary divides in which scholars of literature and rhetoric are often housed in different departments within the same universities (Ianetta 400-01). Such division of the rhetorical and literary traditions has created the impression that what is now has always been; in our contemporary accountings of our disciplinary origins, “repeatedly, literature and rhetoric are constructed as parallel traditions with minimal acknowledgement of their considerable overlap” (Ianetta 401). As a result of this disciplinary split, Ianetta concludes, narratives of pre-disciplinary history are reconstructed according to current disciplinary realities.

The truncating effects of this scholarly myopia, which Ianetta critiques in her analysis of nineteenth century rhetorical and literary theory, hold even more import for a period such as the medieval, in which the dissection of rhetorical-literary culture leaves both fields misshapen and with a precious few texts to call their own. That is, our study of that relatively recent eighteenth and nineteenth-century culture in which Ianetta places her argument has a wealth of both rhetorical and literary materials sufficient to support both a rhetorical and a literary tradition. Thus, while her argument may rightly assert the distorting effects of such separatists moves, her line of inquiry would seem even more urgent to a period such as the medieval, for which the textual record is far less complete.

This tendency to separate literature from rhetoric impoverishes not just our shared historical understanding but our individual pedagogies as well. Categorizing a text such as Sir Gawain and the Green Knight as solely a literary artifact cuts off a range of intersections that can potentially open up the text to non-experts, such as our undergraduate students and non-expert faculty teaching survey courses. In literature courses of the Beowulf-to-Virginia Woolf variety,

we discuss Sir Gawain and the Green Knight in terms of poetic form or Arthur’s troublesome model of kingship, and we discuss Chaucer’s The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale in terms of proto-feminism or her potential relationship to radical religious groups – much of which relies heavily on detailed historical and cultural knowledge of late medieval England, which students presumably access through textual apparatus and lecture. However, if we frame medieval texts in terms of their relationships to the rhetorical tradition, our students can interpret the speech acts of various characters, from Gawain’s defense of Arthur to the Wife of Bath’s anger at her husband’s misogyny, as engaged in types of rhetorical actions that our students may find familiar: a young, ambitious man attempting to prove himself by defending his leader, or a woman, such as the Wife of Bath, exasperated with the patriarchy, observing that history is painted by the victor.

Who peyntede the leon, tel me who?

By God, if women hadde written stories,

As clerkes han withinne hir oratories,

They wolde han written of men moore wikkenesse

Than al the mark of Adam may redresse. (III.692-96)

Examining the rhetorical dimensions of medieval works can help students to comprehend the often troublesome language and culture that produced these texts. A focus on the overlap of rhetoric-poetic expands the ways that students engage with medieval texts that can seem a lifetime away; it also offers new pedagogical techniques for instructors of survey courses, especially those who are not medieval specialists, to teach difficult pre-Renaissance material.

Although many textbooks, anthologies, and survey courses either neglect or avoid the Middle Ages, an emphasis on the overlap between medieval literary and rhetorical traditions can

help us all – rhetorician and literary specialists, medievalists and non-specialists – better understand pre-disciplinary history. A critical methodology focused on rhetoric-poetic as a singular intellectual tradition is not without precedent; indeed, in contrast to static notions of disciplinarity, the medieval period saw no division between literature and rhetoric. As George Kennedy notes, the work of medieval poets is fundamentally indebted to rhetorical training, so much so that “a [literary] work’s ability to apply and vary this [rhetorical] teaching ... was what made it seem ‘literary’ to the ears and eyes of medieval audiences” (220). In other words, for the medieval audience literature and rhetoric are innately intertwined: much of what registered to their sensibilities as successful literature is based on the execution of rhetorical concepts and teaching. And James Murphy, perhaps noting the same overlap between medieval rhetorical study and literary production as Kennedy, suggests that “much remains to be learned” about the “applications of Latin rhetoric to Middle English literary works” (x). Literature, as Kennedy and Murphy suggest, is a relatively untapped resource for supplying knowledge about the rhetorical tradition in the Middle Ages.

In order to understand this inherent interdisciplinarity of medieval rhetoric-poetic, we must turn to the Middle English Dictionary (MED), the foremost language resource for scholars of medieval culture. The MED defines “rhetoric” as “one of the seven liberal arts dealing with eloquence and persuasiveness of language” and as a “[m]astery of literary eloquence, elegance in writing or speech” (MED 1a, 2a). “Eloquence” is “[t]he art or practice of speaking or writing with fluency, stylistic distinction, appropriateness, and persuasive power; literary diction or style; literary art, poetry,” and “[p]ersuasion, persuasiveness, fine words, sophistry” (MED 1a, 2a).² These definitions of eloquence showcase the slippery divide between spoken and written language during the medieval period. In addition to noting the tenuous distinction between oral

and written language, the very definition of rhetoric as “persuasiveness of language” and “literary eloquence” betrays that overlap between rhetoric and poetic that Kennedy and Murphy assert.

To help correct our contemporary understanding of the relationship between medieval rhetoric-poetic, this essay takes up Murphy’s call for increased research into the overlap between the medieval literary and rhetorical traditions. By arguing that medieval texts we currently designate as strictly “literary” are actively participating in the rhetorical tradition, this essay seeks a dual purpose: to offer an increased range of texts to enrich our understanding of the medieval rhetorical tradition and to collapse our artificial distinction between medieval rhetoric and poetic. To illustrate the means by which we might achieve these ends, this essay reads a portion of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (SGGK) into the rhetorical tradition. By highlighting the ways in which SGGK models different types of public speech and their civic ramifications, I argue that this “literary” text participates in debates over the political effects of rhetorical skill that stretch back to the Roman tradition through Cicero’s On Invention (De Inventione) and On Duties (De Officiis). Such a focus on the political potentialities of eloquent speech foregrounds the ways that a medieval text can simultaneously participate in both literary and rhetorical traditions. Moreover, investigating SGGK as a simultaneously literary and rhetorical event can provide insight into the Gawain-poet’s education and intellectual influences, which, although of particular interest to specialists in medieval literature and culture, are nonetheless significant to historians of rhetoric looking to better understand the evolution of literacy. In all, this essay helps correct disciplinary histories that separate rhetoric and poetic into discrete fields of study with separate traditions. Toward that end, this essay first works towards reintegrating medieval rhetoric and literature by drawing together the disparate understanding of

our contemporary disciplines. I then turn to a section of SGGK to illustrate what such an enriched lens might bring to our reading of long-canonical texts. I conclude by suggesting ways in which the reintegrating of the perspectives of literature and rhetoric might enrich both our scholarship and our teaching. Ultimately, then, this essay argues for breaking disciplinary divides so that we might open medieval texts to new readings – and to new readers.

A Singular Tradition: Medieval Literature and Rhetoric

Fourteenth-century England was home to a wide variety of literature – a native dramatic tradition, religious and devotional writing, and English, Anglo-Norman, and Latin verse – but much of what survives – and is now taught -- is the poetry of the period. Within this range of literary production, SGGK, a highly sophisticated and courtly romance in verse form, has earned a central place in literature anthologies and classrooms. As a widely circulated and often taught text, SGGK provides the opportunity to recover ignored or suppressed textual influences that have been neglected by both literature and rhetoric scholars.³ That is, because of its preeminence in English classrooms and in the canon, examining SGGK as a literary and rhetorical artifact provides a theoretical framework that can potentially be applied to other medieval texts.

Generically, SGGK is a romance, and judging from the texts that survive from the late medieval period, romance was a dominant genre (Cooper 6, Reiss 108-09). Although a broad category, romance is generally characterized by a central heroic character (often the knightly representative of a royal court), the presence of magic, and a quest motif. Romances ranged from low-brow, popular, and often bawdy tales to highly sophisticated, courtly poetry – or poetry about the ladies and heroic knights of royal courts. SGGK, like other late medieval courtly romances, was likely intended for oral recitation, although it could have been intended for solitary reading. But either the single reader or the group audience for SGGK would have been

familiar with both English and classical literary traditions, and the creators of these medieval tales could draw freely from these earlier works. Romance, for example, as a form that “tends to encompass and synthesize” other forms and genres, drew on folkloric, classical, historical, biblical, and, as I argue, rhetorical traditions (Reiss 109). In other words, medieval romance worked from both traditions and topics that were well known to the audience: historical and quasi-historical accounts of heroes, battles, and kings; stories surrounding the Trojan War; and other classical and English traditions (Reiss 111).

Medieval readers and listeners looked to romance for entertainment and edification, as well as for thought-provoking material to fuel conversation and debate over important social issues. Helen Cooper summarizes the social function of romance reading during the Middle Ages, saying that romances were likely “used as material for conversation and argument” (13). Thus a romance such as SGGK would have been expected to instigate intellectual conversation and cultural debate:

It is indeed hard to imagine that the author of a work such as Sir Gawain and the Green Knight would not have sought, and elicited, such a response. Debate lay at the heart of much medieval culture, across most of the civil institutions invented in the Middle Ages; in the law courts, in the king’s council, in Parliament, in the universities. Romances could provide a secular form analogous to academic debate. Their audiences expected to respond actively to them, and the writers encouraged such a response. (Cooper13)

As Cooper suggests, SGGK’s medieval audience would likely look to the poem as a springboard from which to discuss social issues, and many critics agree that SGGK forwards the sorts of debates over social issues that Cooper describes. Greg Walker, for example, sees SGGK as essentially “a debate about the nature of Arthurian kingship and courtliness” (125). However,

Walker like other critics who find issues of knightly speech, courtliness, and chivalry as central to the poem (Walker 125, Benson 44-55, Pearsall 11-13) do not explore the interaction between the poet’s treatment of these issues and the rhetorical tradition in which he participates. Thus, while those issues of “debate” that Cooper cites are important to literary scholars, there has been no research into the relationship between those disputes over issues of speech and conduct that such texts as SGGK articulate and/or illustrate and those parallel debates in rhetorical treatises upon which such medieval texts draw.

In stark contrast to this depiction of medieval culture’s propensity toward public debate, standard histories of rhetoric depict medieval culture as stultifying public debate over legislative or civic issues. In this vein, Robert Herrick argues that “the legislative assemblies and courts of law that had characterized Greek and Roman culture, and that had much to do with the development of the classical rhetorical tradition, were largely absent from the medieval European scene,” a sentiment echoed in The Rhetorical Tradition (128-29; 431). Instead of the political and legislative use of rhetoric that marks its Greek and Roman tradition, our contemporary discourses on rhetoric in the late medieval period are largely confined to prescriptive treatises on preaching (ars praedicandi), letter writing (ars dictaminis), and poetic composition (ars poetriae). Such prescriptive handbooks, according to Thomas Conley, “constitute by far the greatest part of available material on rhetoric in the Middle Ages from about 1100 to the first decades of the Renaissance” (93) – a claim that Herrick repeats (497).⁴ Citing changes in government and an epistemological move toward prescriptive handbooks, most historians of rhetoric conclude that medieval rhetoric lost its civic interest. However, as I argue, we can see that rhetoric continued to evolve during the Middle Ages when we blur the lines between the strictly rhetorical and the strictly literary. Through such texts as SGGK, a romance

that Cooper argues would have been generative of social debate, rhetoric found a medium through which to voice concerns over political uses of rhetorical eloquence. Such an understanding of a “literary” text as participating in the rhetorical tradition of debate over the function of civic rhetoric stands in contrast to narratives of rhetorical history that paint the Middle Ages as devoid of civic rhetoric.

The Gawain-poet’s exposure to civic rhetoric would have been part of his rhetorical education. Cicero’s On Invention and On Duties form much of the small but stable Ciceronian influence on medieval rhetoric (Conley 90-91, Kennedy 220, Silverstein 1), and these two texts complicate the claim that political rhetoric is largely absent from the medieval tradition. Scholars tell us that the Gawain-poet likely received a university education as part of clerical training, (Putter 4-11, Spearing 39-40), and such training would provide access to Cicero’s On Invention and On Duties and the prescriptive writing handbooks that Herrick cites as central to medieval rhetorical theory. Rhetoric was taught in universities as part of the trivium, or the “three roads” of grammar, rhetoric, and logic that formed the basis of the medieval liberal arts curriculum; and it is as a result of his university education that the Gawain-poet would have encountered Cicero’s On Invention and On Duties.

The interest in the ramifications of eloquent, civic speech in Cicero’s On Invention and On Duties forms the foundation for the treatment of rhetorical skill in the first two sections of SGGK. As a statesman, orator, and rhetorician, Cicero’s career colors the attitude toward civic matters in his rhetorical works. In his On Duties, for example, which found an audience from antiquity to the American Revolution, Cicero theorizes a system of moral duties that dictates citizens’ behavior toward their families and toward the state, and the opening of On Invention explicitly questions the civic function of rhetoric:

I have often seriously debated with myself whether men and communities have received more good or evil from oratory and from a consuming devotion to eloquence. For when I ponder the troubles in our commonwealth, and run over in my mind the ancient misfortunes of mighty cities, I see that no little part of the disasters was brought about by men of eloquence. (1.1.1)

Eloquence, and its impact on the state, features throughout On Invention and On Duties – indeed, Cicero thought and wrote extensively about the relationship between rhetoric and politics in his rhetorical works.⁵ The prescriptive writing handbooks that Herrick references doubtless featured prominently in a medieval rhetorical education, but Cicero’s civic-minded rhetorical works had an important place alongside of them.

Although the rhetorical tradition was central to medieval educational theory, few have studied the relationship between the medieval rhetorical tradition and literary texts written by educated medieval writers. Following James Murphy’s and George Kennedy’s calls for interdisciplinary scholarship, I now turn to SGGK as a text that simultaneously participates in the medieval rhetorical and literary traditions. By positioning the first two sections of SGGK within a Ciceronian tradition of debate over the ramifications of civic rhetoric, I suggest that SGGK contributes to both the literary and rhetorical traditions. While an interest in political rhetoric permeates the poem, for the sake of concision this essay is confined to the opening sections of SGGK, which most readily lend themselves to the political ramifications of eloquent speech. Although political rhetoric may have been largely absent from the medieval historical scene, as Conley says, rhetoric’s political potential is at the forefront of SGGK.

Political Rhetoric and SGGK

Undergirding this investigation of SGGK are two assumptions based on what we know about the circulation of Ciceronian texts in the late Middle Ages and the Gawain-poet’s education. First, the Gawain-poet read Cicero’s On Invention and On Duties as part of his university education. Second, the central question of On Invention’s opening – whether men of eloquence are good or bad for a government – informs the Gawain-poet’s treatment of rhetorical skill in SGGK. Such a focus on eloquence, which here means persuasiveness of language,⁶ can occasion both civic improvement and civic destruction; it can either stabilize or undermine the state. Cicero explores the impact of rhetorical eloquence and concludes that eloquence, when coupled with wisdom, stabilizes and orders civic life (On Invention 1.1.1). On the converse, eloquence without wisdom can “corrupt cities and undermine the lives of men” (1.2.3). It is the means by which men raise themselves from savage brutality to civilization (1.2.1). And, Cicero continues, when men couple their eloquence with wisdom, they can save nations from war (1.2.3). In his On Duties, Cicero defends the power of civic rhetoric by claiming that speech is a prerequisite for any sort of human society or community (On Duties 1.50). “The bond of [human] society is reason and speech,” Cicero says, suggesting an intrinsic connection between a well-functioning society and speech. He continues, stating that reason and speech “reconcile men to each other and join them in a sort of natural community by teaching, by learning, by communicating, by discussing, by judging” (1.50). For Cicero, all moral action, and especially speech, should in service of society and the state (1.58).

But Cicero concedes that eloquence can also have destructive political consequences. Eloquent but immoral men can wreak havoc in the polis when they, “with a certain agreeableness of manner—a depraved imitation of virtue—acquired the power of eloquence unaccompanied by any consideration of moral duty, then low cunning supported by talent grew accustomed to

corrupt cities and undermine the lives of men” (On Invention 1.1.3). Here, Cicero expresses skepticism over an orator’s ability to positively influence the polis. However, Cicero defines true eloquence as rhetorical skill coupled with wisdom and duty, and such a combination of eloquence and moral obligation ensures that the orator will defend the city and public interest. Indeed, the only safeguard against immoral men of eloquence is the eloquent, wise man: “but the man who equips himself with the weapons of eloquence, not to be able to attack the welfare of his country but to defend it, he, I think, will be a citizen most helpful and most devoted both to his own interests and those of his community” (On Invention 1.1.1). As the opening to his On Invention shows, Cicero was deeply troubled by the potential of his teachings to produce strife within a community. He resolves this issue by coupling rhetorical skill with moral obligation; the true orator uses his eloquence, like Gawain, for the welfare and defense of the state.

This Ciceronean understanding of eloquence provides insight into SGGK, where the polis is none other than Camelot. This mythic capital is a meeting place for the King and his Knights of the Round Table, who gather together for a New Year’s celebration. However, the Green Knight—a monstrous, green, and hostile man with an oversized axe—appears in the great hall and interrupts their feast. The Green Knight enters the banquet hall and challenges the court to what folklorists call a “beheading game,” or a literary motif common to early Northern European literatures. The terms of the beheading game are, the Green Knight explains, that Arthur cuts off the Green Knight’s head now, and in exchange, the Green Knight will cut off Arthur’s head in a year’s time. Arthur accepts the challenge, but before he can lop off the Green Knight’s head, Gawain intervenes and takes responsibility for Arthur’s agreement. The supernatural and fantastic are frequent components of romance, and here, the invulnerability of the Green Knight’s supernatural body allows the beheading game to become the focal point around which

many of the poem’s thematic concerns revolve. Most importantly for this analysis, the beheading game showcases Arthur’s model of kingship, the Green Knight’s destructive political eloquence, and Gawain’s eloquence that works to defend the king and the community. These models of eloquence align SGGK with the Ciceronian debate over the ramifications of political eloquence.

Arthur is a dubious model of kingship, and the weakness of his leadership is revealed in the rashness of his rhetoric. Arthur is a young, proud, and impetuous ruler: the text describes him as “childgered” [childish], “brayn wylde” [impulsive], and of “3onge blod” [young blood] (86-89). When he sits down to a holiday meal, he refuses to eat until he hears “an uncouþe tale” [a strange story]; if he does not hear something strange, he challenges another knight to “joyne wyth hym in justyng, in jopardé to lay” [join him in jousting, to lay in jeopardy] (93 – 97). In other words, the King’s rhetoric is not very kingly here, for rather than seeing words as a means of tending to the body politic, Arthur views words as a vehicle for his own entertainment. His impetuosity creates a dangerous opportunity for a destabilizing force such as the Green Knight and his deadly game.

In On Invention, Cicero warns against just such a model of kingship as embodied in SGGK. Arthur is an eloquent speaker – the text assures us that “rad was he neuer” [he was never rude] (251) – but he lacks the wisdom that Cicero requires of eloquent men who work to protect the polis. “[E]loquence without wisdom is generally highly disadvantageous and is never helpful,” Cicero warns, and Arthur’s youth, brashness, and boyish impetuosity prove disadvantageous for Camelot and its people. Although Arthur is king of Britain, he accepts the apparently fatal beheading game; he imperils his kingdom, which would lose its king to such a dangerous game. Arthur’s choice also questions his ability to reason in the rational, wise manner that Cicero suggests is best. Indeed, Arthur seems marked by a propensity toward physical

violence, both in the dangerous jousting that accompanies holiday meals (93-97) and in his violent posturing in response to the Green Knight’s beheading game (328-331). Such a reliance on the physical is reminiscent to Cicero’s discussion of human society before the advent of speech: “[f]or there was a time when men wandered at large in the fields like animals ... they did nothing by the guidance of reason, but relied chiefly on physical strength” (1.2.2). Not until the placating force of Gawain’s rhetoric does Arthur see the error of accepting the Green Knight’s game, dangerous as it is for both him and for the kingdom over which he rules.

The violence of the Green Knight’s beheading game would seem appropriate to the king’s impetuous and physically dangerous disposition; the narrative logic of the Green Knight’s arrival and beheading game request would constitute both the “uncoupe tale” and the physically dangerous “jopardé” that Arthur’s nature demands. Further, when capitalizing on Arthur’s propensity for the spectacle of violence in words and deeds, the Green Knight also models destructive political eloquence. When bursting into Camelot, he asks “Wher is...pe governour of bis gyng?” [Where is the leader of this band?] (224-25). Without any sort of formal greeting, the Green Knight addresses Arthur’s court as a “gyng,” or an assembly or band, instead of using any of the honorific descriptors deserving of a royal court (MED 1). He also ignores Arthur’s physical elevation above the court on the royal dais (222, 349). The apparent hostility and open disrespect of the Green Knight’s challenge, coupled with the Green Knight’s frightening physical appearance, render Arthur and the court silent. Although some of Arthur’s knights are silent because they are afraid (“for doute”), some are silent out of “cortaysye” [courtesy] (246-47). Here, courtesy is allied with the rhetoric of the state: it is a set of behavioral ideals that dictates who can and cannot speak in a public, courtly setting. Courtesy both describes and conditions appropriate chivalric speech and actions: the knights stay silent because they wait for a response

from “þat wyȝe” [that man] whom “al shulde loue” [all should revere]. Arthur’s knights wait for Arthur to respond, and when Arthur does, he does so courteously and politely. However, the Green Knight continues to berate Arthur and Camelot in order to force Arthur into accepting the beheading game and endangering the kingdom.

The Green Knight’s “gomen,” or the beheading game, is the instrument through which he showcases the negative potential of disruptive civic rhetoric. The rules of the beheading game require one of Arthur’s knights to cut off the Green Knight’s head, and in return, that this knight will have his head cut off by the Green Knight in a year’s time. The Green Knight opens his challenge to “any herinne,” [anyone here] again refusing to acknowledge Arthur’s prerogative to respond (300). When his question is again met with silence, he continues,

What, is þis Arthures hous ...

Where is now your sourquydrye and your conquestes,

Your gryndellayk and your greme, and your grete wordes?

Now is þe reuel and þe renoun of þe Rounde Table

Ouerwalt wyth a worde of on wyȝes speche,

For al dares for drede withoute dynt schewed!' (309-15)

[What, is this Arthur’s house? Where is your arrogance and your conquests, your great words and your presumption? Where is the revel and the renown of the Round Table, overthrown with a word of a man’s speech, for none dare speak for fear?]

The Green Knight interprets the silence as fear (“drede”), which it may well be: indeed, the Green Knight, with his green hue and oversized axe, does seem to justify the knights’ trepidation. However, the Green Knight also accuses Camelot of failing to live up to its reputation, and he recognizes the apparent disjuncture between Camelot’s reputation for bravery

and its present reluctance to respond to a martial threat. He censures Arthur’s court for “grete wordes” and “sourquydrye” [arrogance, presumption], implying that Camelot does not deserve its reputation for “greme” [martial spirit]. In other words, the Green Knight accuses Arthur’s court of being arrogant, presumptuous, and overconfident. Whatever the court has achieved, he seems to say, is merely “grete words”: inflated and undeserved. More significant, however, is the Green Knight’s own admission of the power of his disruptive civic rhetoric – the whole Round Table is “Ouerwalt wyth a worde of on wyȝes speche” [overthrown with a word from a man’s speech], painting a forceful image of rhetoric’s potential to generate strife within a civic context.

If, as I have argued, the Green Knight’s goal is to entrap Arthur in the beheading game agreement, he knows that his inflammatory words will entice the rash Arthur into responding. Greg Walker claims that Arthur’s acceptance of the Green Knight’s challenge implies that Arthur “forgets his responsibilities as king ... and places the kingdom in jeopardy for the sake of his personal sense of shame” (115-16). While Walker is correct to identify this rashness as the attribute least appropriate to the role of king, he neglects the issues of courtly decorum that regulate the courtiers’ behavior: the Green Knight knows that the courtiers, out of a sense of decorum (which the text terms “courtesy”), defer to Arthur’s prerogative to respond. In short, Arthur must respond: it is his right, and his duty, as king. The Green Knight’s speech, then, is rhetorically calculated to imperil the king and, at the very least, to sow discord within the polis. If the Green Knight’s goal is to entrap Arthur in a beheading game agreement, then the rhetoric by which he entraps Arthur is necessarily interested in producing strife at Camelot. The Green Knight’s provocative words recall Cicero’s discussion of “eloquence unaccompanied by any consideration of moral duty,” in which “low cunning supported by talent ... corrupt[ed] cities and undermine[d] the state” (On Invention 1.2.3). As opposed to the Ciceronian ideal of public

discourse in which men use rhetoric in order to improve the kingdom, the Green Knight’s oratory publicly humiliates the king, challenges his authority, and so demonstrates how words can provide a direct threat to the peace of state.

Opposed to Arthur’s brash words and the Green Knight’s boastful oratory is Gawain’s public, civic speech, designed to preserve the state and its ruler. According to Cicero, “the wise control of the perfect orator not only upholds his own dignity, but also that of the general public and of the entire state” (De Oratore 1.8.34).⁷ In order to defend the state against the Green Knight, Gawain requests that Arthur relinquish responsibility for the beheading game. Gawain’s request seemingly employs the epideictic mode; however, this type of public praise is, in effect, a legislative oration cleverly disguised as an epideictic encomium. In other words, Gawain uses praise to enact legislative change. His rhetorical display reflects the poem’s interest in the potential of eloquent speech:

For me þink it not semly—as hit is soþ knawen—
 Per such an asking is heuened so hyȝe in your sale,
 Pat ȝe ȝourselȝ be talenttyf, to take hit to yourseluen,
 While mony so bolde yow aboute vpon bench sytten ...
 Bot for as much as ȝe ar myn em I am only to prayse;
 No bounte but your blod I in my bode knowe.
 And syþen þis note is so nys þat noȝt hit yow falls,
 And I haue frayned hit at yow first, foldez hit to me.
 And if I carp not comlyly let alle þis cort rych

Bout blame. (344-61)

[For I think it is not seemly, as it is truly known, that such an undertaking be accepted by one of such high esteem, although you are talented enough to take it yourself, when so many bold men sit in this hall ... and only because you are my uncle am I to be praised. Therefore, this request is unseemly for you to accept, and since I have asked, transfer it to me. If I do not speak comely, let this rich court decide.]

Gawain is here able to achieve several things: he praises Arthur, impresses the court, suggests his own worth by noting fault within his fellow knights, and, most importantly, preserves the body politic. Although Derek Pearsall argues that “[o]ne should not mistake [Gawain’s speech] for humility” (358), Gawain’s affected modesty topos, as E.R. Curtius suggests, is actually a rhetorical strategy designed to place the audience in a “tractable state of mind” (83). Cicero, too, suggests that a man who uses eloquence in defense of the polis is “a citizen most helpful and most devoted both to his own interests and those of his community” (On Invention 1.1.1). By employing this rhetorical strategy, Gawain potentially saves Arthur’s life: the Round Table, apparently impressed with Gawain’s rhetorical skill, “redden alle same / To ryd þe kyng wyth croun / And gif Gawan þe game” [agreed to relieve Arthur and to give Gawain the game] (363-65). The narrator’s reference to the king’s “croun” could be punning on the king’s head, which the Green Knight would remove as part of the beheading game. Gawain’s rhetorical strategy, then, is to convince the young, “brayn wild” and “childgered” king that accepting the beheading game is indecorous. Gawain’s public oration, although not entirely altruistic in that Gawain uses it for self-praise, serves the state and preserves the king.

The civic nature of Gawain’s rhetoric recalls Cicero’s discussion of the importance of coupling wisdom and eloquence. Gawain literally defends the king’s life, and he would seemingly enact the militarism of Cicero’s metaphor in doing so: “the man who equips himself

with the weapons of eloquence ... to defend [the state] ... will be a citizen most helpful” (On Invention 1.1.1). Gawain’s eloquence literally defends Arthur against the Green Knight’s aggression. His rhetoric not only defends the king, but it also mitigates Arthur’s propensity toward physical violence. Cicero sums up the power of speech on a physically powerful man: “Certainly only a speech at the same time powerful and entrancing could have induced one who had great physical strength to submit to justice without violence” (1.2.3).

Recollecting Cooper’s claim that medieval romance provoked debate in its readers and listeners, SGGK would seem to ask questions about what eloquence can do in a political setting. In this literary instance, eloquence can defend a questionable king or imperil him. Such a debate over the outcome of Gawain’s eloquent defense of king and country is also implied by the text. When Gawain sets out to receive the Green Knight’s return blow, many courtiers gather to see him off. However, there is grumbling among them; many are unhappy to see such a beloved knight ride to his almost certain death. In particular, they express that Gawain could perhaps become a great leader and explicitly question Arthur’s rule:

And haf dyȝt ȝonder dere a duk to haue worȝed.

A lowande leder of ledez in londe hym wel semez,

And so had better haf ben ȝen britned to noȝt,

Hadet wyth an aluisch mon, for angardez pryde.

Who knew euer any kyng such counsel to take

As knyȝtez in cauelaciounz on Crystmasse gomnez? (679 - 685)

[Without wonder Gawain would become a duke, and seemed that he would make a great leader of men, and would better have been a leader than be butchered for nothing by an

evil man, all for angry pride. Who ever heard of any king to take such counsel during a Christmas game, from knights in celebration?]

Here, the text models an interpretative response that Cooper suggests is indicative of medieval romance: Gawain’s peers question Arthur as king and the court’s decision to transfer the beheading game to Gawain. According to the text, Gawain would potentially make a great leader of men, and here Gawain is praised while Arthur is criticized. Implicitly, Gawain might become a better ruler than Arthur. Arthur’s “angardez pryde,” provoked by the Green Knight’s destructive rhetoric, has sown discord within the community.

Although modern scholars tend to categorize texts along disciplinary lines, in the pre-disciplinary world of the late Middle Ages – and, indeed, in any pre-disciplinary era – such lines were not so firmly established. Thus a literary text could do the same kind of work as rhetorical theory; it could, as SGGK demonstrates, inspire debate about the nature of civic eloquence and what words can achieve in a political setting. Reading SGGK alongside Cicero’s On Invention, despite these works being claimed by separate disciplines, sheds light on how poets thought about rhetorical issues and suggests, more broadly, how scholars from other historical periods can better understand the intersection of rhetoric-poetic. Rather than simply receiving a rhetorical tradition, SGGK asks its readers to mimic the text’s internal debate over the outcome of Gawain’s eloquent defense of a rash and foolish king. And by shedding current disciplinary assumptions we can help to enrich the medieval rhetorical and literary traditions, which are unfairly constructed as impoverished and insignificant in many of the major disciplinary histories of rhetoric and literature. That is, SGGK’s use of a literary form to debate a rhetorical question complicates boundaries between medieval rhetoric and literature. Indeed, it is not difficult to imagine reading other medieval texts as sites of intersection between rhetoric-poetic: although

this paper considers the role of men’s speech in civic decision making, the persuasive tactics of late medieval romance’s female characters – such as Lady Bertilak in SGGK or the Hag in the Wife of Bath’s Tale – are equally open to debate. Such an analysis of romances’ female characters can reveal how medieval poets understood the influence of women’s speech on political decision making. A critical methodology that fuses rhetorical and literary traditions, in other words, not only opens new avenues to scholars of English Studies, but it also helps us better understand how pre-disciplinary authors thought about rhetorical issues.

Toward Bridging the Gap

In 2003, Seth Lerer urged medievalists to reevaluate our understanding of medieval literature as a coherent, author-centered tradition. Lerer argues that the notion of a singular, rigidly defined tradition of medieval literature is created by contemporary literature anthologies, but that the medieval textual record suggests that “literature” existed as “an assembly of fragments, individuated texts, local analyses, or year-by-year annals that reveal the fragmentary nature of medieval literary culture and, in turn, the artificiality of the great narratives imposed on it” (1253). Lerer’s revisionist understanding of literary culture during the medieval period as fragmented, loosely defined, and encompassing many genres bears startling resemblances to the overlapping relationship of medieval rhetoric and literature. Indeed, as Lerer’s analysis perhaps more broadly suggests, some other grand narratives that attempt to produce a cohesive vision of medieval literary culture – and narratives that attempt to construct versions of intellectual history that divorce literature and rhetoric – need to be abandoned if we are to better understand medieval practice.

Although Lerer moves us closer to understanding how literature and literary texts were understood historically, trends in the development of composition and rhetoric programs may

have impeded our ability to fully integrate rhetoric into literary study. That is, when Erika Lindemann and Gary Tate debated the merits of including literature in first year writing courses, most rhetoric and composition programs followed Lindemann in excluding literature from freshman composition. Such curricular changes may serve the best interests of writing classes by bringing about an increased attention to writing pedagogy in the writing classroom. But in removing literature from composition, we may have inadvertently removed composition – and rhetoric – from our literary understanding, thus impoverishing both our intellectual traditions and our classroom practices.

The literary and rhetorical traditions, however, can be reconciled. Understanding literature and rhetoric as overlapping traditions, and teaching and reading works such as SGGK as sites that demonstrates the historical tendency to conflate the rhetorical and the poetic, offers ways to help students – and teachers – appreciate and understand linguistically and thematically difficult medieval texts. Although many scholars willingly admit politics, gender studies, and other disciplines into their readings and teaching, this analysis suggests rhetoric as another point of access for difficult texts of all periods of pre-disciplinary history. For both graduate and undergraduate courses that survey pre-disciplinary history, rhetorical analysis can shed light on historical praxis; it can, in other words, bring students closer to understanding how such periods understood rhetoric and literature as a singular intellectual tradition. The teaching of rhetorical theory in such courses, in addition to the political and social information that is currently taught, helps contextualize the period beyond the strictly disciplinary and adds to possibilities for both teachers and students – more ways to teach a text, and more historical, linguistic, and aesthetic insights for our students.

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² The MED’s definition of “eloquence” corresponds to Cicero’s definition of the term; according to his On Invention, “[t]he function of eloquence seems to be to speak in a manner suited to persuade an audience, the end is to persuade by speech” (1.5.6).

³ The poem appears, either in full or in part, in The Norton Anthology of English Literature, The Longman Anthology of British Literature, and The Broadview Anthology of British Literature.

⁴ For examples of such medieval rhetorical texts, please see Kennedy 314 and Murphy’s Three Medieval Rhetorical Arts.

⁵ For Cicero, rhetoric is part of politics: “we will classify oratorical ability as a part of political science” (On Invention 1.6.5).

⁶ “The function of eloquence seems to be to speak in a manner suited to persuade an audience, the end is to persuade by speech” (On Invention 1.5.6).

⁷ *De Oratore* may not have been available during much of the European Middle Ages (Murphy RMA, 361). However, this sentiment is indicative of Cicero’s general attitude toward civic rhetoric. See also On Duties 1.5.15: moral action is primarily concerned “with the conservation of organized society.”

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