

Rebellion Through Literature in Feudal Society

Art being a tool of resistance is no contemporary trend. In fact, if Camus is to be believed in his essay "Rebellion and Art", art is inherently a rebellion against reality (Camus 1). "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight", "The Canterbury Tales", and "The Second Play of the Shepherds" all reflect this perspective quite clearly when viewed through the context of their Feudal cultures. Whether it be through moral failings, nearly fantastical inversions of society, or simply showing the reality of life in those conditions, these works all illustrate the constant tug of war between the civil niceties and the barbaric animalism at the core of the human condition and comment on the structures that beget them.

"Sir Gawain and the Green Knight", being an Arthurian tale and a chivalric romance, centers on the high society of England in the Middle Ages. While this poem can be seen as just another knightly story detailing the chivalry of King Arthur's court, there is a subversion of these same chivalric values present throughout the tale and an undercurrent of the barbarity of feudal society. From the very beginning, there is a hint of this subversion directed at King Arthur himself. After describing the feast laid out before his court, the Pearl Poet adds characterization to King Arthur, "It pleased him not to eat...ere first he was apprised/of some strange story or stirring adventure" ("Sir Gawain" 91-93). Because of their cultural mores, the guests were not allowed to eat until their host had begun, thus showing King Arthur's childish penchant for forcing his guests to wait until they had sufficiently entertained him. This childish behavior is further illustrated with the appearance of the Green Knight, whose figure is so handsome ("Sir Gawain" 179-184), dress so regal ("Sir Gawain" 151-173), and attitude so haughty that

it simultaneously stuns Arthur's knights ("Sir Gawain" 239-245) and aggravates Arthur ("Sir Gawain" 316-320). How quickly Arthur is brought to a boil only further shows the lack of maturity and self-assurance that would be expected of a king as renowned as himself. The final and most egregious example of Arthur's lack of kingly chivalry is his advice to Gawain regarding the Green Knight's game. He advises Gawain to give the Green Knight "one cut to address" ("Sir Gawain" 372) and says that if he "learnest [the Green Knight] his lesson" ("Sir Gawain" 373) he would be able to "bear any blow [the Green Knight] gives back later." ("Sir Gawain" 374) This advice, while seemingly good for Gawain's self-preservation, is quite uncivilized in the context. The Green Knight was clear that this is simply a "Christmas pastime" ("Sir Gawain" 283) and Arthur is essentially telling Gawain that if he kills the Green Knight then he need not worry about the returning blow. This is a fairly dishonorable way to partake in what is supposedly a friendly challenge and also quite a barbaric retort to what Arthur perceives to be a challenge to his status.

"The Wife of Bath's Tale" from "The Canterbury Tales" shows a similar deconstruction of chivalry. The opening contextualizes the story as an Arthurian tale (Chaucer 863-869). However, this is immediately recontextualized by having one of King Arthur's knights rape a young woman (Chaucer 893-894), showing that this will not be just another Arthurian romance. This immediately subverts any expectations of the chivalry and honor of knights and is followed by the condemnation of the knight because of public outcry (Chaucer 895-896). King Arthur then gives the knight's fate over to his queen and her ladies who say that they will give him his life if he is able to tell them what a woman most desires within a year and a day (Chaucer 908-915). In the universe

of “The Canterbury Tales”, this has essentially become a power fantasy, as this power being held by women (or, perhaps, even the fact that the knight is being punished at all) is something that all of the pilgrims, especially the Wife of Bath, know is impossible given the structure of their society. This, then, can already be seen as a criticism, and by extension a rebellion, against both (or either) the patriarchal structure of their society as well as the unjust hierarchy that puts commoners completely at the mercy of the aristocracy. Even without the rest of the tale, which outlines that women want sovereignty above all else and shows the knight relenting to this idea (Chaucer 1043-1048,1236-1244), there is already clear evidence of the rebellion against societal pressures and rules that is so inherent to art, especially when seen in the light of the commoners being victims of and judges on the bestial behaviors of the aristocracy.

This theme is continued in *The Second Tale of the Shepherds*, which opens with peasant laborers lamenting their status and material conditions. The first shepherd, Coll, complains of their oppression and explicitly blames the gentry (“Second Play” 15-18). Saying the aristocracy “reave[s]” them (“Second Play” 19) and showing indignation at the idea that this is “for the best” (“Second Play” 21). Already, there is a clear example of art criticizing the society that it is created under in perhaps the most relatable and unchanging way, low-class laborers being mistreated by those above them. This rebellion by the shepherds is further demonstrated later in the play when Mak, a man known for stealing sheep, makes his appearance. After attempting to first trick the shepherds (“Second Play” 189-207), Mak tries to gain their sympathy by telling them he has too many kids to feed and not enough money to do so (“Second Play” 226-252), which essentially mirrors the shepherds’ own troubles in their lives, potentially hinting at

a congruity and laying the groundwork for a future sympathy. Mak eventually does steal a sheep (“Second Play” 292-295) which he takes home and attempts to pass off as a newborn baby (“Second Play” 333-336). When the shepherds discover this (“Second Play” 584-620), the third one, Daw, is adamant that Mak must face the death penalty. Coll is able to convince Daw to spare him, instead only humiliating Mak as punishment (“Second Play” 623-628). This mercy is then rewarded by the appearance of an angel who tells the shepherds that they are ordered to witness the nativity (“Second Play” 638-646). This is the ultimate condemnation of their society. Despite going against the authority of the land by sparing Mak, they are rewarded by the highest authority in the form of God and His angels. This implication is twofold — it simultaneously states that the laws of the land are unjust in the eyes of God and that the shepherds are the truly righteous ones, while also condemning the barbaric punishment that Daw and their laws would have enacted.

Despite seemingly creating an ordered, civilized society, the power structures of feudalism brought about an inequity which was then abused in monstrous ways. These tales demonstrate that inequity and showcase the forces that regulate it whether it be an authoritative figure, the people themselves, or even just personal morals. And this is at the very core of art; it reflects and subsequently criticizes ourselves and the structures we belong to, while also highlighting how the reactionary actions and the measured restraint at the center of all people affect this duality of civil society and barbaric animalism.

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