

# Hideous Green Knights Sleep Monstrously: A Night of Debate in Davis

ELI ELSTER



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*WRITER'S COMMENT: The essay has not always been so ubiquitous as it is today—in ages past, the dialogue was an equally valid form. Where the essayist binds their diverse thoughts to a single mind, the dialogist speaks through many voices, each bearing a separate viewpoint; so when Professor Vernon invited us, for our final paper, to write something other than an essay, I jumped at the chance to use this form, one well suited for the discord and volatility of literary criticism. Having been asked to make a “critical intervention” into a term discussed in our Medieval Literature class, I chose “monstrosity” and filtered it through Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. It has lots to say on that deeply interesting word. Professor Vernon himself, alongside Amanda Hawkins, my wonderful TA, joins a cohort of imagined critics to discuss whether the eponymous “Green Knight” is, in fact, a monster. This is the first dialogue I’ve written for a class, and I enjoyed the process immensely—I don’t think it will be my last.*

*INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Creativity as a function of risk-taking is difficult to encourage in my students at the best of times. There is too much at stake to stray from the familiar: a perfect GPA, admission to law school, all the things that just make paradigm stretching seem like a too-costly luxury. Occasionally I can encourage a student to take a chance and trust themselves to make something ambitious, but that involves building a rapport that I was not able to do this year. This is all to say that what follows is not only a work of critical thinking that synthesizes a variety of medieval texts in a form that demonstrates a deep understanding of argumentation and engagement with difficult*

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*material, it is wholly a product of Eli's willingness to be creative in that underappreciated sense of the word. He has taken a broad set of arguments about 1000 years' worth of material and put them into action that does not strive for completeness, but rather entertains the richness of a dialectical method. What follows is bold, clever, smart, and above all, brave.*

—Matthew Vernon, Department of English

**Scene:** *The Monster Society for Monsters has gathered in the Theater. As they wait for the evening's talk to begin, members wander between their seats, debating various questions of strength and chivalry. One asks whether Hippocrates' daughter, being both damsel and dragon, is therefore stronger than normal dragons; another laments Heaney's failure to write a worthy prequel for Grendel. On stage sit Art and Ginny, the leaders of the executive board, alongside Dr. K, a guest speaker. Art raps his gavel. The chatter ceases; the lights dim; and a spotlight array flickers on, dressing the stage in a nauseous mix of green and gold.*

Art: Thank you. On this evening of June the 10th, the Monster Society for Monsters is pleased to welcome Dr. K, head of the Monstrous Center for Monstrosities at UC Davis. He is here, by popular request, to discuss an atypical but no less monstrous beast: the Green Knight, that worthy challenge to Sir Gawain. (*The crowd murmurs.*) While the Green Knight is not the most monstrous of monsters, he is, nonetheless, a monster. Dr. K is here to explain just how that is the cas—

*A door slams open at the back of the auditorium. Professors Vernon and Hawkins stride into the room. On each of their left hips sits a large battle axe; on their right, a sprig of holly. The axes scrape against the floor, leaving long, green trails in the carpet. Those in the aisle seats scramble back and look toward Art, who cannot seem to find his gavel.*

Art: And just who—

Hawkins: Stop! (*She reaches the stage and levels her axe at Dr. K.*) You will stop, or you will *be* stopped!

Dr. K: (*huddling into his collar.*) You won't, you wouldn't, I didn't!

Vernon: (*walking up the steps.*) No. You will not. You will NOT! (*He turns to the crowd.*) There are many, many monsters for you, good people, to discuss. (*He sniffs his holly and begins pacing along the stage. Hawkins continues to glare at Dr. K.*) But the Green Knight (*he stops*) is not a monster.

Ginny: But, sir! (*Vernon turns. Ginny does not waver.*) He is a giant, and warlike, and . . . and green! You mean to tell me that *he*, that *thing*, is not a monster? Not monstrous? Not a monstrosity?

Hawkins: Exactly. And we're here tonight (*she replaces her axe and turns*) to prove it.

Art: (*dabbing his neck with a handkerchief.*) Well! (*He coughs.*) Well . . . if you will not leave, you may at least sit and cease your threats. A good debate is more than welcome. Isn't it, Dr. K!

Dr. K: Why—sure. But I am *certain* in my findings. The Green Knight is a monster. Nothing more, nothing less.

*Art unfolds two chairs for Vernon and Hawkins, who place their axes and holly carefully upon the stage and sit.*

Vernon: Certain? Hm. So let us hear it. Then will we strike a finishing blow, and be done with this nonsense and slander.

Dr. K: Fine. (*He begins pacing along the stage.*) Let us begin with a definition, so as to prevent any future confusion in terms. What, Professors, is a monster? I say it is a being that defies category—that is, one whose place within the world cannot be comfortably defined. Take Grendel, for instance. Would you agree that *he* is a monster?

Vernon: Yes.

Hawkins: Certainly.

Dr. K: And why, may I ask, is that so?

Hawkins: Because he lives in two worlds but belongs to neither. Consider the Heaney translation. He writes the following of Grendel: “he had dwelt for a time / in misery among the banished monsters / Cain's clan, whom the Creator had outlawed and condemned as

outcasts” (100–106). As an outcast from the Creator’s world, he must once have resided there—but his home was not replaced in exile. As Heaney says, he does not occupy the hinterlands comfortably. Instead, Grendel hangs along their borders, caught between the light and the dark without embodying either.

Dr. K: Precisely. And one might develop the point by noting those entities which we do *not* call monsters. Beowulf, despite his terrible strength and ferocity, is not a monster—for he epitomizes and represents his people. Nor are the enemy tribes; though they pose a great threat to the Geats, they still belong to their worlds. Monstrosity is not antagonism, then, but interstitiality. Do we agree upon this condition?

Vernon: For the sake of argument, yes. But generalization will be your doom. (*The crowd, both excited and cowed, draws back.*)

Dr. K: Humph. (*Hawkins chews on her holly.*) Let’s look at your man’s appearance. I quote, “When there hove into the hall a hideous figure / square-built and bulky, full-fleshed from neck to thigh / the heaviest horseman in the world, the tallest as well / his loins and limbs so large and so long / I think he may have been half-giant” (136–140). (*Scattered applause ensues.*) Just where does the Knight belong? At no point, I say, can the author tell how to describe him. He is called, firstly, a “hideous figure,” a creature discernible by little save his grotesquery. Only then does he venture at labels: “heaviest horseman,” a man exaggerated, and “half-giant,” a beast born lacking his full mutation.

Hawkins: We get it.

Dr. K: Bear with me, please, for the truth grows muddier. “Anyway,” writes the poet, “I can say he was the mightiest of men” (141). Dissatisfied by all three of his previous ventures—“hideous figure,” “heaviest horseman,” and “half-giant”—he tries again with the second, only to find himself defied by the strangest, most monstrous quality at all: “not only was this creature / colossal, he was bright green” (149–150). It is this factor that defies the minds of the court and High Table. Recall how “they gazed at him a long moment, amazed / Everyone wondered what it might mean / That a man and his mount could

both be coloured” (231–240). The Knight defies their imaginations. Adventures and glory did not prepare them for such sights. Clearly, the Green Knight defies category—and you’ll recall, I hope, your prior agreements.

Art: Let’s allow our “guests” to retort.

Vernon: Thank you. You’ve said—and I agree, once again—that a monster defies categories, living between without embodying. Yet while betweenness is, undoubtedly, a *necessary* condition of monstrosity, it is by no means sufficient, per your example, to make a monster. Something else comes into play—something obvious, I might add. (*Dr. K glowers at Vernon’s shoes.*) You mention Grendel as the monster *sine qua non*, on the basis of limbo. But what indicates that limbo to the reader? Why, his misery within his borderland, along with his discomfort outside it. Misery denotes his failure to belong. It is therefore an imperative for a proper monster; how can a being be said *not* to belong, unless he shows us the fact through feeling? Now tell me, Doctor, does the Green Knight seem miserable?

Dr. K: No, I suppose he doesn’t.

Vernon: In fact, he appears not only content, but glorious. He carries two worlds, the natural and knightly, through a “magnificent array” of traits and symbols described as “richly studded . . . delicate,” while his hair cleaves “to his neck like a king’s cape” (151–179). How can you call him monstrous? Is his betweenness not beautiful? Any rational man will see the difference between him and a wretched thing like Grendel—and I hope, Doctor, you will be rational.

Dr. K: Your point is a good one. But even if, as you say, the Green Knight is not monstrous in appearance, he is monstrous in his actions. Since you have proved—and I thank you for it—that betweenness is necessary but not sufficient, I will introduce another related condition: monsters disrupt the “proper” category, in this case King Arthur’s court. The tale begins with a feast attended by *all* the finest knights and ladies—headed, of course, by Arthur, of whom “men say . . . was the greatest in courtesy” (26). Beside him sits Guinevere, “no woman lovelier” (81). What, my friends, do we observe in this great hall? Nought but the fullness of strength, virtue, and, above all else, chivalry.

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Arthur and his court epitomize that final quality—in disrupting their court, then, the Green Knight disrupts the chivalric category as a whole.

Hawkins: Professor, you cannot possib—

Dr. K: Please! Allow me to finish. (*Ginny blushes at his severity.*) Note also the *degree* of his disruption. He moves beneath a chivalric guise, issuing a challenge that *appears* brave and sporting but, in reality, has a guaranteed outcome—since he cannot, as we see, die and therefore lose. Yet Gawain, being *truly* chivalric, must take on the quest. Thus the Green Knight assumes the skin of his target, before destroying it from the inside. Like a virus, he imitates and abuses the response of his host. I do not establish a new claim in saying so; rather, I mean to denote just how monstrous his actions are. Can we imagine a more disruptive act?

Hawkins: Hypocrisy.

Ginny: Hm?

Hawkins: He speaks of *faux* chivalry, while donning a false intelligence. (*Dr. K sputters.*) Once again, he speaks pure nonsense—(*to Vernon*) may I? (*Vernon strikes his axe into the floor.*) Let's start with your first claim. You think that disrupting the "proper" world is monstrous; I invoke David Hume in a response. One cannot deduce a moral principle from empirical facts. (*The crowd oohs and aahs.*) Yes, the Green Knight disturbs the court. But you're harboring a bias, Doctor, derived from the Knight's appearance. So perhaps we can work by analogue, to prevent any confusion. As an "expert" on the topic, you'll recall *The Turke and Sir Gawain*. Correct?

Dr. K: Correct.

Hawkins: He intrudes and issues the same challenge—a blow for a blow. And yet, he strikes the reader as homely, at most, but not monstrous.

Dr. K: But *he* does not speak from his own severed head! *He* does not survive decapitation!

Hawkins: Are you sure? The text isn't. Remaining translations leave out the space between Gawain's blow and his journey—we know, however,

that the Turke survives the strike and speaks immediately after. Your analysis slips beneath blood and gore when, in principle, the stories match exactly. And as the great Vernon ascertained, appearance does not make a monster. Neither, it seems, does disruption.

Dr. K: (*clearly befuddled.*) Well, fine! Then they're *both* monsters. They attack King Arthur's court, the great star of chivalry! An attack on the court is an attack on knightliness and the moral good—therefore, it is monstrous.

Hawkins: Hume's principle, once again. But there's an easier way to prove you wrong. Is the court perfect, Doctor? Is it infinitely moral? Is King Arthur a deity, or a man?

Dr. K: I—

Hawkins: Why, then, must Gawain, the only knight willing to take on the challenge, admit finally his “covetousness and cowardice . . . succumbing to deceit?” (2509). If the court's finest is not quite perfect—if time to improve remains—then the court *itself* is imperfect. Hence why, amidst the revelry, King Arthur is said to speak of “courtly trifles” (108). We can argue whether the challenge is fair or worthwhile—but we cannot do so based on a false sense of perfection. If monsters live only to confront the faultless, then neither the Green Knight nor the Turke is a monster.

*Dr. K is speechless. Art and Ginny stare blankly toward the balconies. Replacing his axe and holly, Vernon stalks down the stage; Hawkins waits for a moment, then follows. The at-first reticent crowd now moves toward them, hoping to know the great purveyors of truth. Suddenly, Ginny rises.*

Ginny: Professors! (*Vernon and Hawkins stop but do not turn around.*) If the Green Knight isn't the monster, then . . . who is?

Vernon: Must there always be a monster? Our point tonight was not to argue someone *else's* monstrosity, but to defend our Knight from the claim. Your generalizations, though they may apply to Grendel and others, do not apply to *him*. (*He motions to the crowd.*) I leave you all with a warning, wrought first by Gustave Flaubert. A monstrosity, he said, is something outside of nature, a thing that lives in the extremes

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(Sartre 97). Whether he was correct in this estimation is worth debating—but ask yourselves a simple question. Does King Arthur’s court live naturally, like the Green Knight? Or might we see their donning of the “band of green” (2517) as an attempt to move *closer* to his state—that is, to become more *like* the supposed monster? And let me say one thing more. Monstrosity—much like the monsters themselves—is unstable and indefinite. It is sometimes useful to generalize; but a good reader is wary of overzealous analysis, and is prepared to accept the terms laid out by a narrative without bringing to it preconceived notions or systems. Hesitate, I ask you, next time your instincts demand a label. Consider whether that label is, in fact, the right one—and remember that the text knows better than you.

*Hawkins breaks the door with a blow from her axe. Holly leaves drift in their wake as they leave the auditorium. The lights go up. The crowd turns to find three empty chairs onstage.*

## Works Cited

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