

“Such a dunt as þou hatz dalt”: Decapitation in Medieval Literature

Decapitation has always held a special place in literature. The removal of a being's head can mean any number of things, ranging from death to freedom. Throughout the medieval period, beheading is a common theme, appearing in many major works, notably *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Carle of Carlisle* and *Beowulf*. These three poems all feature scenes of decapitation; however, there is an overarching purpose for all of these beheadings: the transfer of power. Through their respective removals of challengers' heads, the protagonists of these poems achieve some vestige of power. While the two of these stories dealing with Gawain follow a very predictable pattern derived from Celtic myth, the theme of power transferred via beheading can easily be seen in the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf* as well. Through a swing of their axe or sword, the heroes of these epics win the power given to them, with all the rights attached. Kings, knights, and heroes were made in this way: the way of beheading.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is perhaps the quintessential beheading story: there is a challenger, a hero, and a decapitation. However, the transfer of power is quite subtle in such an archetypal story. The Green Knight, showing up at Arthur's court looking for a knight brave enough to withstand his challenge is contesting the power that resides in the reputation of the Knights of the Round Table, claiming an honorable high ground. At first he seems to be correct in his assumption of authority in the matter of judging their worth, as no knight initially stands up to accept his challenge. The shift of power from the court to the Green Knight is shown in Arthur's frustration at the lack of courage in his men-at-arms, a frustration that culminates in the king himself accepting the challenge, only to have Gawain then step forward and ask to remove the burden from the king's hands. When Gawain severs the Green Knight's head, he reclaims the

honor of the court by having sealed the pact of “blow for blow” with the verdant being. This turns out to not be true, however, as the Green Knight, despite the decapitation, is quite capable of returning the initial blow in the year and a day agreed upon prior to Gawain’s cleaving of his neck, leaving the pact unfulfilled and therefore, the sovereignty of Arthur’s court to determine its own honor unattained. The Green Knight does not leave this assail of Gawain’s, and therefore Arthur’s court’s, honor unclear, stating:

To the Green Chapel come, I charge you, to take
 Such a dint as you have dealt - you have well deserved
 That your neck should have a knock on New Year’s morn.
 The Knight of the Green Chapel I am well-known to many,
 Wherefore you cannot fail to find me at last;
 Therefore come, or be counted a recreant knight. (451-6)

Gawain, however, ever dutiful, does set off to seek the Green Chapel and allow the promised blow. The “beheading,” of Gawain is a simple nick on the neck from the Green Knight’s massive axe, but it does complete the transfer of power meant to be accomplished by Gawain’s original decapitation of the Green Knight. This small cut, even, is only a mild punishment for Gawain’s slight deviation from perfect chivalry in his taking of the green girdle without letting it be known to Sir Bertilak; however, following Gawain’s mock decapitation, Sir Bertilak holds him well amended:

Such harm as I have had, I hold it quite healed.
 You are so fully confessed, your failings made known,
 And bear the plain penance of the point of my blade,
 I hold you polished as a pearl, as pure and as bright

As you had lived free of fault since you were first born. (2390-4)

The pact, at this point, has been completed; blows were exchanged, one man lost his head and the other regained the honor attached to his own name and, transitively, the honor of the court he serves. This shifting of power moves along the channels opened by the blade of the beheading axe, flowing first from the Green Knight to Gawain, then back, only to be returned to Arthur's nephew once more by virtue of his own "beheading."

The Carle of Carlisle is another story in which a transfer of power occurs on the proverbial chopping block of decapitation. While the initial challenge physically takes place away from Arthur's court, the challenge is meant to call upon the essence of Arthur's court itself, testing the chivalry of not only Gawain, but also Sir Kay and Bishop Baldwin, in this case specifically targeting their gracious natures as guests. By entering the house of the Carl as guests, despite his reputation for boorish hospitality, they in effect accept the challenge of acting chivalrously in the face of such uncivilized manners. Once this test has been passed, Gawain is asked by the Carl to "Take this sword and stryke of my head," introducing the decapitation scene of the poem (385). While Gawain initially resists, claiming he would rather die than do such a thing, he relents when the Carl threatens to take off his head if Gawain does not do as he asks (394). Following his "beheading," the Carl turns into a normal human form and praises Gawain for his service to him. The man was freed from an enchantment by Gawain, placing the power over the man's life firmly in Gawain's hands, a power solidified through the marriage of Gawain to the Carl's daughter. The formal reinstitution of honor to the court of Arthur is embodied in a message the Carl asks Gawain to deliver to his King:

And say unto Arthur our King

And pray him that hee wold,

For His love that Judas sold
 And for His sake that in Bethelam was borne,
 That hee wold dine with him tomorne. (440-4)

This reaffirmation of honor shows that the power, initially taken by the challenge to courtesy of the Carl, is restored to Gawain and therefore Arthur's Court, all as a result of the decapitation of the Carl, breaking his enchantment. *The Carle of Carlisle* displays the transfer of honor and chivalric reputation, which represented great power in the Middle Ages, through beheading.

The Carle of Carlisle is a similar tale to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but with noticeable differences between the two, even in the basic structure. While both are "Beheading Game" stories, meaning that they involve an exchange of decapitations as a matter of honor, the differences between them need to be addressed. Each follows a different formula, each having distinct characteristics that distinguish it from the other.¹ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* holds true to the following paradigm: a challenger demands a display of bravery from a member of the court by having his head cut off in return for the opportunity to return the blow some time, usually a year and a day, later, which requires the hero to journey to the court of the challenger and pass a test before accepting the return blow and returning to court. The paradigm followed by *The Carl of Carlisle* is essentially the same, with the main differences being that there is no initial blow from the hero to the challenger and the challenger is transformed in some way following the fulfillment of the hero's task. Some have located the origins of the Beheading Game scenario in the Celtic tradition of annual kingship, in which a queen marries a new husband each year to represent the Mother Goddess' cyclical relationship with the seasons, having a new champion win the kingship each spring as the year renews:

¹ These two versions of the Beheading Game are described in Goucher College's Gawain Project at <<http://faculty.goucher.edu/eng240/Turner%20Gawain%20Project%202005/beheading.htm>>.

...the ravages of time bring her champion to near decrepitude (at the place of winter), ready for toppling by the young hero (at the place of spring).... When he has grown to full manhood, the Hero (at the place of summer) is ready to make his challenge. He successfully overcomes the old champion and summer and winter change places. (Matthews 76)

This mythologically-based political tradition translates perfectly into the idea that the decapitations illustrated in the Celtic Gawain stories are transfers of power, as the young hero, Gawain, who indicates spring, is merely removing the old champion, either the Green Knight or the Carl, representative of winter, from the “kingship,” or position of power. The Beheading Game episodes displayed in both *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Carle of Carlisle* show a seamless transfer of power from the elderly champion to the young hero, via decapitation, as a natural part of the cycle of nature, inevitable and necessary.

The theme of decapitation as power-shifting is not peculiar to the Celtic corpus of literature, however, but is also prevalent in Anglo-Saxon literature, particularly the classic epic *Beowulf*. The first shift in power involving beheading occurs immediately after Beowulf defeats Grendel, or rather, does not occur. While it is true that Beowulf has defeated Grendel, the fact that Grendel escaped while still living is indicative that Heorot is not safe, a point made clear when Grendel’s mother attacks, slaughtering revelers at the feast celebrating her son’s demise. As if to prove that power rests in the hands of the one who collects heads, Grendel’s mother leaves the head of Hrothgar’s close friend, Aeschere, at the foot of the cliff bordering her den as a sign that despite Grendel’s death, the power of lordship over Heorot has not yet returned to Hrothgar. Beowulf, fulfilling his role as hero-in-residence, takes up the quest to destroy Grendel’s mother, diving down into her watery lair to do battle with the creature. Upon finding

her, Beowulf is eventually successful in defeating her, but only by means of cutting her head off with a giant's sword; thus decapitation is the method of transport for the power over Heorot. As if to make amends for his earlier oversight, Beowulf proceeds to remove the head from Grendel's corpse:

....Beowulf in his fury
 now settled that score: he saw the monster
 in his resting place, war-weary and wrecked
 a lifeless corpse, a casualty
 of the battle in Heorot. The body gaped
 at the stroke dealt to it after death:

Beowulf cut the corpse's head off. (1584-90)

Beowulf's butchery of Grendel's corpse for the purposes of decapitation shows the importance of beheading in terms of assuring power and authority are won by the victor. Beowulf has to decapitate not one, but two, monsters in order to reclaim power over Heorot for Hrothgar, learning from his earlier mistake with Grendel that without the head of the one who holds power, power stays with the monsters.

This precise scene from *Beowulf* actually contains a third episode of decapitation and the transfer of power associated with it. The sword Beowulf uses to slay Grendel's mother is an ancient thing, forged by giants ages before the Flood wiped out the majority of that race. Despite this ancient and skilled forgery, the sword "melted as ice melts / when the Father eases the fetters off the frost" (1608-9). The sword does not dissolve completely, however. Its hilt survives for Beowulf to take back to Heorot, coincidentally at the same time as Grendel's head. Upon Hrothgar's examination, we learn that the sword hilt is a record of the history of the world before

the Flood, when giants and their ilk were numerous, before God smote them “in the deluge for retribution” (1693). Acknowledging that the sword is the surviving record of the race of beings from which Grendel and his mother are descended, one could see the melting of the sword’s blade as a sort of beheading of the weapon itself, as well as the history it represents. The fact that there are none left of that race of beings following the demise of Grendel’s mother, at least as far as we know, and the coinciding presentation of the head of Grendel, which assures the transfer of power from that monster back to man, the presentation of the sword hilt as the decapitated history of Grendel’s race is a palpable idea. After Beowulf’s work in Hrothgar’s kingdom, there remain no more of the race the sword hilt’s history concerns; the lineage has been cut off. This ultimate transfer of power from the race of monsters to the race of men is accomplished, both literally and metaphorically, by an act of decapitation, severing both the head of the last monster in Hrothgar’s land from its body and the future of the race of monsters in the Danes’ realm from reality.

Decapitation is the ultimate seizure of power in medieval literature. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, power moves back and forth between the Green Knight and Sir Gawain, who represents Arthur’s court as a whole, until Gawain finally reclaims the power of honor on behalf of his king by completing the Beheading Game. The same retrieval of power and reputation on behalf of Arthur falls to Gawain in *The Carle of Carlisle*, in which a second version of the Beheading Game paradigm brings about a return of authority to Arthur via Gawain. While these two Gawain tales follow a particular strand of Celtic mythology that manifested itself politically in Wales and Ireland, the older *Beowulf* illustrates the Anglo-Saxon element in the decapitation corpus, emphasizing the importance of beheading in the retrieval of power over Heorot from Grendel and his mother. Through the symbol of the Giant’s sword and its figurative beheading

by virtue of the melting of its blade, *Beowulf* further indicates a transfer of power, this time between races: from monsters to men. Decapitation plays a major role in all of these medieval works, being the basis for the transfer of power from one party to another, whether those parties are human, Otherworldly, monstrous, or even an entire species.

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