

7-25-2019

The Beard Conceals and Reveals: Covert Hair in Fourteenth-Century Chivalric Romance

Kelsi Roth

Pacific University, roth0103@pacificu.edu

Recommended Citation

Roth, Kelsi (2019) "The Beard Conceals and Reveals: Covert Hair in Fourteenth-Century Chivalric Romance," *International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities*: Vol. 11, Article 6.

DOI: 10.7710/2168-0620.1134

The Beard Conceals and Reveals: Covert Hair in Fourteenth-Century Chivalric Romance

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

What do beards indicate beyond physical aspects of sex? What do literary representations of beards and hair suggest in terms of masculinity? In the character portraits from Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, male hair and beards are used by the characters to keep their secrets and portray who they want other characters to see while the author uses beards and hair to reveal the hypocrisy of this to the reader. Inversely, in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," hair is used for concealment; in this poem it is used to conceal Bertilak de Hautdesert's true identity as the Green Knight. In this essay I argue the beards and hair of male characters in both *The Canterbury Tales* and "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" are a synecdoche, standing in for both the key attributes of the figure and revealing his hypocrisy.

Keywords

medieval poetry, English literature, beard, hair, gender and sexuality studies, Geoffrey Chaucer, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, *The Canterbury Tales*

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Dr. Elizabeth Tavares for the guidance and knowledge that are the foundation of this paper.

I believe that the beard was as important as the genitals and that it too “made the man.”
— Will Fischer

What do beards indicate beyond physical aspects of sex? What do literary representations of beards and hair suggest in terms of masculinity? In medieval England, beards were symbolic for ideal masculine qualities such as “patriarchal power and social status, physical strength, the rule of reason, and control of emotions and sexuality,” and it was considered to be a marker of masculinity itself (Korhonen 372). In the character portraits from Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, male hair and beards are used by the characters to keep their secrets and portray who they want other characters to see while the author uses beards and hair to reveal the hypocrisy of this to the reader. Inversely, in “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” hair is used for concealment; in this poem it is used to conceal Bertilak de Hautdesert’s true identity as the Green Knight. The men may claim to be a certain way (for example, calm) and before their actions can prove or disprove this, the reader is often given the answer through the description of their beard or hair (for example, his beard may be fiery and wiry showing that the character is not calm but angry). The beards and hair of male characters in both *The Canterbury Tales* and “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” are a synecdoche, standing in for both the key attributes of the figure and revealing his hypocrisy.

Before moving forward, a brief synopsis of the relevant texts are in order. *The Canterbury Tales* begins with the narrator, Harry Bailey, joining a company made of twenty-nine pilgrims who are traveling to the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket in Canterbury. Bailey decides the group will entertain one another with stories on their ride. Bailey says each pilgrim will tell two stories on the way to Canterbury and two more on the return trip. He says he will judge the best storyteller and this person will receive a meal at his tavern. By contrast, “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” begins at New Year’s Eve feast in King Arthur’s court the Green Knight arrives and challenges King Arthur and the other men. The challenge is to strike him with his own axe on the condition that the challenger find him in exactly one year and let the Green Knight strike him back. Sir Gawain rises, takes hold of the axe, and cuts off the Green Knight’s head. The Green Knight picks up his severed head, reiterates the terms of the pact, and leaves. One year later, Gawain starts his journey. Gawain encounters many beasts and is taken in by Bertilak when he is cold and starving. When Gawain finally faces off with the Green Knight, he discovers that the knight is Bertilak and he was being tested all along. There is an exchange of blows and Gawain is sent home wearing a girdle on his arm as a reminder of his shame.

“fir-reed” and “yelow as wex”: Chaucer’s Fiery Beards

Beards and hair communicate to the other characters and the reader in *The Canterbury Tales* by revealing truths about internal character, hypocrisy, secrets, and gender identity. The characters in the text have been given a way to communicate these truths by the author through their beards. The author writes the character’s internal identity through his physical identity: how he grows and wears his beard. This is important because it gives the reader a chance to understand the characters and their actions through a lens of masculinity and identity performance. A character’s hair and beard reveal who he is before he even speaks.

The description of the Frankelain’s sanguin skin and daisy-like beard is a way of telling the reader that he is secretive; hiding his fiery and drunken nature:

A Frankelain was in his compaignye:
Whit was his beerd as is the dayesy;e;
Of his complexion he was sanguin (Chaucer ll. 333–35)

The *Norton Anthology of English Literature* (NAEL) translation glosses two of the bodily humors: “the sanguine, seated in the blood, hot and moist (like air); the choleric, seated in the yellow bile, hot and dry (like fire)” (271, n. 8). The text describes the Frankelain’s face as “sanguin” which, according to NAEL, is “a reference to the fact that the Franklin’s temperament (‘humor’) is dominated by blood as well as to his red face” (269, n. 4). The description of his beard being “white as a daisy” is intriguing because daisies suggest the act of cleansing. The petals of the daisy are white, but the center of the daisy is yellow. These white petals are specifically mentioned in the text—as well as the Frankelain’s beard—however, the center of the daisy is yellow, and the center is not specifically mentioned in the text, nor is the Frankelain’s mouth. This is a sort of secret; both are known anatomy of both flower and man but both go unmentioned. The white of the daisy and beard are on the outside, suggesting an unstained or sinless figure at first. Then there is the flower’s yellow center, and the Frankelain’s mouth is in the center of his beard. This leads to the idea that the Frankelain appears honest until he opens his mouth and reveals the truth of his character which is fiery or angry.

The Frankelain’s complexion is described as “sanguin,” or of a blood red color and “fiery” humor, implying that he is flushed from drinking and an angry man. This combination leads to the impression that this man appears good at first blush, but is in fact drunk and angry. His need for alcohol is confirmed in the following line where we learn he has wine every morning: “Wel loved he by the morwe a sop in win” which means “He loved his morning bread soaked in vine” (Chaucer ll. 336). The combination of him drinking frequently, and most likely being drunk, with his red skin leads to the idea that he is a man prone to anger and drinking as well as fighting and flying.

By comparison, the description of the Shipman’s beard reveals that he is skilled and experienced, having traveled widely:

Hardy he was and wis to undertake;
With many a tempest hadde his beard been shake;
He knew alle the havenes as they were. (Chaucer ll. 407–12)

The beard implies the Shipman’s experience and supports the claim that he was wise and knew about the harbors. The phrasing “with many a tempest hadde his beard been shake” suggests the beard is a separate entity from the Shipman, having its own experiences and qualifications. The combination of the beard as a symbol for masculinity with its many experiences of storms could mean that the Shipman is only a Shipman because he has a beard: it is the source of his masculinity and marker of his professional experience.

Similar to the Frankelain, the description of the Miller’s beard is used to reveal that he is angry, drunk, and crass—his beard is a foreshadow of behaviors to come:

His beard as any sowe or fox was reed,
And thereto brood, as though it were a spade;
Upon the cop right of his nose he hade
A werthe, and theron stood a tuft of heres,
Rede as the bristles of a sowes eres. (Chaucer ll. 556–58)

For the description of the Miller’s hair (both beard and wart) there is a particular emphasis on animals and the color red with the repeated use of “sowe” and “fox.” The repeated use of the color red emphasizes this wild nature: it could be that he is fiery and angry in nature or that he is animalistic, lacking in manners, and crass. The hair grows from him is red so these qualities are inside of him pushing out. The poem goes so far to suggest that he has had so much alcohol it has affected who he is inside (his personality) and is leaching out (his facial hair). In the Miller’s prologue he says:

“Now herkneth,” quod the Miller, “alle and some.

But first I make a protestacioun
 That I am dronke: I know it by my soun.
 And therefore if that I misspeke or saye,
 Wite it the ale of Southwerk, I you praye.” (Chaucer ll. 28–32)

The Miller is saying he is drunk and knows this “by his sound.” This could mean he makes a crass noise such as a fart, burp, or vomits. This would be reinforced by him being described as a pig and a fox. Pigs are known for being dirty and foxes are known for being sly—he tells a dirty tale, while drunk, and gets away with it. All of this imagery—the red, fiery coloring, and the repeated use of animals—leads the reader to the image of a crass drunkard who is willing to fight at the least provocation.

By comparison, the description of the Somnour’s beard, as well as his skin, reveals the abhorrent nature inside him is physically growing outward. His character reinforces a commonly held, if problematic, belief “ugly on the inside, ugly on the outside”:

A Somnour was ther with us in that place
 That hadde a fir-reed cherubennes face,
 For saucefleem he was, with yën narwe,
 And hoot he was, and lecherous as a sparwe,
 With scaled browes blake and piled beered:
 Of his visage children were aferd. (Chaucer ll. 625–30)

This suggests that the Somnour is not a morally mature man and is ill because of it. He has a red face like a cherub: the red is suggesting a drunkard, the “cherub” suggesting chubby, a baby, immature, and related to love or sex. He was covered in pimples, his eyes are swollen, and his eyebrows and beard are growing in patchy and scabby. This is an image of an ill man. He is also described as “lecherous as a sparrow;” he, like an animal, has excessive or offensive sexual desire. Finally, children fear him because of his looks. The text seems to be implying that the Somnour looks ghastly because his actions are ghastly: be lecherous and you will contract a similar disease as a form of just desserts.

By contrast, the description of the Pardoner’s absent beard and long hair imply he has a secret he is trying to keep he may be younger than he claims, that he may be a homosexual, or that he may be a member of the female sex:

This Pardoner hadde heer as yelow as wex,
 But smoothe it heeng as dooth a strike of flex;
 By ounces heenge his lokkes that he hadde,
 And therwith he his shuldres overspadde,
 But thinne it lay, by colpons, oon by oon;
 But hood for jolitee wered he noon,
 . . .
 For it was trussed up in his walet:
 Him thoughte he rood al of the newe jet.
 Dischevelee save his cappe he rood al bare (Chaucer ll. 677–85, 691–93)

The Pardoner has long, straight yellow hair that he wore bare (no hat or covering), hanging over his shoulders (Chaucer ll. 677–85). This is stereotypically a style for women, not men: “No beerd hadde he, ne nevere sholde have; / As smoothe it was as it were late yshave: / I trowe he were a gelding or a mare” (Chaucer ll. 691–93). He does not have a beard and he never would; he always looked like he had just shaven. This suggests he is unlike a man because he cannot physically grow a beard. Finally, the narrator, Chaucer, compares the Pardoner to a gelding or a mare (Chaucer ll. 693). The NAEL

defines gelding as “a neutered stallion, i.e., a eunuch” (278, n. 3). A mare is a female horse, however, the Harvard Chaucer translation translates “mare” to “homosexual” (Harvard’s General Prologue, ll. 691). These overall descriptions of the Pardoner having feminine hair, a lack of beard alongside the inability to grow one, that he is either neutered or a eunuch, and a female horse or homosexual lead to multiple interpretations. It is possible that the text is implying that the Pardoner is young and immature, or that the Pardoner is a homosexual, or that the Pardoner is a woman by birth and now identifies and presents as a man. Considering the particular emphasis on the Pardoner’s inability to grow a beard but enhanced ability to grow head hair, the description of “eunuch” and “female horse” makes available the reading that the Pardoner had been born as a woman and now presents as a man.

“kitte it with hir sheres”: Alisoun’s Hair Tales

Aside from the Pardoner, there is another character who cannot grow a beard: Alisoun, the Wife of Bath. Alisoun tells the tale of her husband reading her two hair-oriented stories of warning; both tales discuss secrets, hair, and marital betrayal. The first is the Biblical tale of Samson’s wife cutting off his hair and the second is the tale of Midas using his hair to shroud his donkey ears. In the first is both a question and a warning from husband to wife. Alisoun, says of her husband:

Tho redde he me how Sampson lost his heres:
Sleeping his lemman kitte it with hir sheres,
Thurgh which treson loste he both his yën. (Chaucer ll. 727–29)

There are quite a few complexities here. Alisoun’s husband, Janekin, reads about a Biblical character having his hair cut off by his lover whilst he slept. During this period, if one shaved off one’s own hair it could be for practical reasons, such as making the wearing of a wig easier, or it could be a way of declaring one’s humility and faith, like monks did (Korhonen 375). However, if the shaving was inflicted upon someone, the shaving became “a weapon of humiliation and control” (Korhonen 375). Even if this aspect of humiliation and control does not apply to the Biblical story of Samson and his wife, it applies to Janekin and Alisoun. The fact that the husband is reading this to his wife may be his way of asking: Are you going to harm me while I sleep? Are you going to physically remove my masculinity?

The second tale read by Janekin and retold by Alisoun is about Midas hiding his donkey ears. The tale reveals that, like the characters in “The General Prologue,” hair was used to hide the truth from others. The tale (Midas) within a tale (Alisoun and her husband) within a tale (“The Wife of Bath”) within a tale (“The Canterbury Tales”) begs the question of whom should the reader believe when each character is telling tales about lying? The tale of Midas points out to the reader, again, that hair is used to conceal the truth:

Ovide, amonges othere thinges smale,
Saide Mida hadde under his longe heres,
Growing upon his heed, two asses eres,
The whiche vice he hidde as he best mighte
Ful subtilly from every mannes sighte,
That save his wif ther wiste of it namo. (Chaucer ll. 958–63)

This tale supports the idea of hair and beards being used to conceal the truth about the man growing them because the idea is repeated with a magical twist: Midas is hiding donkey ears. This is a moment when the text is pointing directly to hair being used to conceal a truth about a man and that he was trying to hide that truth from the public. This ties back in with the earlier ideas of trust between a husband and wife. In the last tale, Janekin, is asking his wife, Alisoun, if she will harm him. Here he is again dancing around the idea of trust in a marriage. For no one knew of Midas’s ears “save his wife

there wits of it namo,” or “except for his wife.” In this tale the wife inadvertently reveals the secret about her husband’s ears, and in doing so betrays his trust and their marriage.

“green as his horse”: Bertilak’s Chameleon Beard

In the anonymous poem “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” Bertilak de Hautdesert uses his chameleon-beard and hair—changing from green to red—to deceive Sir Gawain about his loyalties. When his hair and beard are green, he deceives King Arthur, Sir Gawain, and the other knights of the round table into thinking this is his sole identity is that of the Green Knight:

The hair of his head was as green as his horse,
fine flowing locks which fanned across his back,
plus a bushy green beard growing down his breast,
which hung with the splendid hair from his head
and was lopped in a line at elbow length
so half his arms were gowned in green growth. (Armitage ll. 180–85)

The Green Knight’s beard is long, stretching over his entire body, which could be taken to mean he is more powerful than the men in the room who are lacking lengthy beards. The length of the beard is used to show the strength and the experience of the man who grows it; it threatens the power of the men in the room because their own beards do not compare. Neither Arthur’s nor Sir Gawain’s hair nor beards are described in this moment. In fact, Arthur is first described as “a man of high will” and that he “brimmed with ebullience, being almost boyish” (Armitage ll. 57, 86). Sir Gawain is first described as “good” and “young” (Armitage ll. 109, 370). When Arthur is going to take a swing at the Green Knight with the axe the Green Knight “stands there sternly, stroking his beard” (Armitage ll. 334). In the Middle Ages, facial hair and physical strength were sometimes used in impermanent tactics during power struggles (Meysman 368). The Green Knight’s beard is a clear threat to the knights in the room and he uses it to show Arthur he does not view him as a threat; casually stroking it whilst the “boyish” Arthur attempts to kill him.

Bertilak de Hautdesert also uses his green hair when he is the Green Knight in order to conceal his true identity and trick Sir Gawain into thinking he is loyal to him and will not harm him:

Gawain gazed at the lord who greeted him so gracefully,
the great on who governed that grand estate,
powerful and large, in the prime of his life,
with a bushy beard as red as a beaver’s,
steady in his stance, solid of build,
with a fiery face and fine conversation:
and it suited him well, so it seemed to Gawain,
to keep such a castle and captain his knights. (Armitage ll. 842–49)

The color of Bertilak de Hautdesert’s beard is red when he is human and green when he is the Green Knight. Red is the color that Sir Gawain wears throughout the poem and Bertilak’s beard being red could show that he is loyal and will not harm Sir Gawain while he is human. This is supported by the fact that Sir Gawain’s stay at his castle was a test that left him physically safe and satiated. When the beard is green, however, it signals he is no longer loyal to him and may harm him.

Bertilak is literally two-faced: the good, red-bearded Bertilak, and the bad, green-bearded Green Knight. Bertilak’s red beard is a way to trick and convince Sir Gawain to trust him. Building off of this leads to a surprising possibility: that the author is taking the well-used technique of a beard showing who a man is and turning it on its head to trick the reader. By having Bertilak’s beard be red

the reader thinks he is good and separate from the evil, green-bearded knight. In the end, the reader is surprised because it is revealed the good, red beard has been disguising the evil, green beard after all. This is a continuation of the theme of beards being used to reveal a truth about men despite who they claim to be, only this time with a twist thrown in by the author.

“from his head”: Some Conclusions

In both *The Canterbury Tales* and “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” the beards and hair of men are a synecdoche, showing the characteristics they wish to portray as well as revealing the hypocrisy of this portrayal. The Frankelain’s daisy beard and sanguine skin reveal his desire to deceive others by projecting an innocent persona. It also reveals the hypocrisy of this by using allegory to describe his internal nature to the reader: that he is a fiery drunk. The Shipman’s beard reveals that he is skilled because of his beard and the experiences it has undergone. The description of the Miller’s beard is used to reveal that he is an angry and crass drunkard. The description of his beard is a foreshadow for his behavior later on in his tale when he confesses he is drunk and crass. By comparison, the description of the Somnour’s skin and beard reveals the internal abhorrence growing outward. His hair, skin, and beard are a forewarning to other characters, and the reader, about his ghastly personality. The Pardoner’s inability to grow a beard, combined with his long hair, imply that he is trying to keep a secret about his age, sexuality, or gender identity. He may be an immature youth, a homosexual, or have been born a woman and now identifies and presents as a male.

By contrast, those with magical beards signal different desires. The Wife of Bath, Alisoun tells of her husband reading the tales of Samson and Midas—the first is a tale about hair, shame, and fear. The second is the tale of Midas, a tale of hair being used to conceal the truth: that Midas has donkey ears. In “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” Bertilak de Hautdesert uses his chameleon hair and beard—changing between red when he is Bertilak and green when he is the Green Knight—to disguise his true identity and loyalties. The cases of male hair and beards above reveal a pattern in this early literature: male characters desire to portray themselves one way but the text reveals the hypocrisy of this and shows the truth. The beards particularly revealed that they were angry, drunken, and hiding a secret; sometimes it is their identity, and sometimes it is a pair of ears.

Works Cited

- Armitage, Simon, translator. "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt, vol. A, 10th ed., Norton, 2018, pp. 202–25.
- Chaucer, Geoffrey. "1.1 General Prologue." *Harvard's Geoffrey Chaucer*, edited by Larry D. Benson, President and Fellows of Harvard College, <https://chaucer.fas.harvard.edu/pages/general-prologue-0>. Accessed 30 June 2019.
- . "The Canterbury Tales." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt, vol. A, 10th ed., Norton, 2018, pp. 301–19.
- Fischer, Will. "The Renaissance Beard: Masculinity in Early Modern England." *Renaissance Quarterly*, vol. 54, no. 1, pp. 155–87. doi: 10.2307/1262223.
- Korhonen, Anu. "Strange Things Out of Hair: Baldness and Masculinity in Early Modern England." *Sixteenth Century Journal*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2010, pp. 371–91. doi: 10.1163/ej.9789004172517.i-176.39.
- Meysman, Stefan. "Degrading the Male Body: Manhood and Conflict in the High-medieval Low Countries." *Gender & History*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2016, pp. 367–86. doi: 10.1111/1468-0424.12213.