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### Sir Gawain and the Expensive Home Decor

The classic poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* takes place at two fictional courts of fourteenth century England -- King Arthur's Camelot and Lord Bertilak's equally sumptuous court. At both courts, the poet is meticulous in describing the finery and riches that the nobles enjoy. Stanza three of fitt I, we are told that "the feast flowed unbroken for a good fifteen days" (SGGK I. 44). The poet also includes strikingly similar descriptions of the wall hangings of both courts, making explicit mention of silk, imported fabrics, and bright colors. Silk was expensive and highly valued in Medieval continental Europe, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight's* setting in England renders silk even more valuable. The amount of silk and the grandiosity of the decoration described in the poem indicate that the poet was attempting to communicate the courtly virtues that each king possessed. Scholarly sources indicate that clothing made of fine fabrics was used to symbolize the wearers' right to their high social positions, and wall hangings were much the same.

### **The Value of Silk**

Silk in Medieval England was not only incredibly expensive, it was outright illegal for lower class citizens to purchase and wear according to fourteenth century sumptuary laws dictating what. According to Sarah Silverman, "silk was ... restricted to the higher income bracket of Gentlemen and Esquires, and Knights, the two highest social classes covered by the sumptuary law" (13). Importantly, a 1336 sumptuary law prohibited non-royals from purchasing

imported fabrics. Silk, which originated in China, could not be manufactured in England until the 1700s, according to Silverman (12). Therefore, not only was silk expressly forbidden for use by anyone other than the highest classes, its purchase was forbidden as well, rendering the material doubly banned. The Gawain poet strongly emphasizes, almost to the point of flaunting, the presence of silk and imported fabrics, mentioning “expensive silk siding and a ceiling above/ Made of drapes from Toulouse and Turkmenistan” (SGGK II. 76-77) in Bertilak’s court and “curtains of sheerest silk and shiny gold hems” (SGGK I. 854) in Arthur’s court.

This “double banned” status of silk would have made it even more valuable for those who could purchase and use it. The mere fact that the Gawain poet spends 11 lines in the otherwise fast-paced poem on descriptions of expensive wall-hangings that do not advance the plot speaks to the value placed on silk. Within the adventurous context of Gawain’s arrival at Bertilak’s court, the change in pace to the description of the silk-laden “boudoir” where he is to sleep is almost jarring. The beginning of the stanza, when he meets Lord Bertilak, reads as follows:

Gawain glanced at the lord who had greeted him so kindly

And considered him capable of guarding the castle--

An enormous fellow, by the way, exactly at his prime.

...

And he seemed in all truth (or so Sir Gawain supposed)

Just right for leading a lordship with its leigemen. (SGGK II. 841-844, 848-849).

Compare this to the same number of lines taken from later in the same stanza:

They led him into a boudoir where the bedding was splendid,  
With curtains of sheerest silk and shiny gold hems,  
And coverlets quaint with the most becoming panels,  
Brightly lined at the top, with embroidery at the sides.  
The draperies ran on ropes with red-gold rings (SGGK II. 853-857).

The first five-line quotation describing Gawain's first impression of Bertilak, contains five verbs, plus strong nouns and gerunds, such as "lordship" and "guarding." There are no forms of "to be," except for those implied in the third line. By contrast, the second quotation, describing Gawain's first impression of his bedroom, contains just two verbs-- "led," and "was," neither of which connote as much action as the verbs in the first quotation. This sudden shift of focus from action to description indicates that the author feels that the silk and other decorations are significant enough to merit an in-depth examination. The author uses this same technique in fitt I, stanza IV for the parallel description of Camelot's decorations, and in fitt I, stanza VIII to describe the Green Knight's attire. Both of these instances involve similar descriptions of silk and other decorative material.

### **The Implications of Silk**

Since silk was so valuable (of course, the causation undoubtedly went both ways), its use had massive social implications. These implications ranged from being a simple communication of political power to ethical standards that silk-wearers were expected to follow. According to the Textile Society of America, silk in the Medieval world was commonly used as political capital, especially by the Byzantine Empire. In an educational post on their website, Stephen Wagner notes that "every foreign ambassador that visited Constantinople was granted

a gift of silk” (Wagner). Because the Byzantines were the only Western manufacturer of silk at the time, according to an article by Melissa Snell, silk was only available through diplomatic relations with the Byzantine Empire or trade with a party who had diplomatic relations with the Byzantine Empire. The possession of silk, therefore, was an indication that the owner was on good terms with the Byzantines, and that meant power.

Silk had less obvious implications too, however. Jill Mann’s paper “Courtly Aesthetics and Courtly Ethics in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*” explains how magnificent and expensive clothing was considered a “natural expression of the inner splendor of courtly virtues and a reflection of their special qualities” (236). This argument posits that specific aspects of the clothing itself reflects certain moral characteristics of the wearer, such as the five virtues of Gawain’s pentangle. To expand this argument to its logical conclusion, the splendor and value of the wall hangings reflects the inner splendor and value of the two nobles. The adjectives used to describe both the hangings and the people. Bertilak is described as “bright” (SGGK II. 846), as are the coverlets in his castle (SGGK II. 856). Meanwhile, both Lady Bertilak and the castle’s curtain hems “shine” (SGGK II. 854, 957). In this way, the splendor of the decorations and the splendor of the people who own them are reflected in each other.

## Works Cited

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Wagner, Stephen. "The Impact of Silk in the Middle Ages." *Textile Society of America*, 14 Sept. 2016, [textilesocietyofamerica.org/6326/the-impact-of-silk-in-the-middle-ages](http://textilesocietyofamerica.org/6326/the-impact-of-silk-in-the-middle-ages). \*

\* Although these are not scholarly sources, I felt that it was appropriate to use them to supplement the other sources, as they both cited a specific chapter from *The Cambridge History of Western Textiles* that I was not able to access. This chapter, by textile scholar Anna Muthesius is titled "Silk in the Medieval World."