

“I SHOULD NOT HAVE COME TO THIS PLACE”: COMPLICATING ICHABOD’S FAITH
IN REASON IN TIM BURTON’S *SLEEPY HOLLOW*

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JOEL KENDRICK FONSTAD

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ABSTRACT

Tim Burton's films are largely thought to be exercises in style over content, and film adaptations in general are largely thought to be lesser than their source works. In this project, I argue that Burton's film *Sleepy Hollow*, an adaptation of Washington Irving's "Legend of Sleepy Hollow," expresses his artistic message, that imagination and the irrational are equally valuable lenses through which to view the world as scientific process and reason are, while simultaneously complicating the thematic concerns of the longstanding myth of the headless horseman, the supernatural versus the natural and the irrational versus the rational, and relating them to his personal anxieties about the parent child relationship. I do so by drawing parallels between the film and its immediate source as well as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, another chapter in the headless horseman myth, and two horror films from the 1960s. I compare the narrative structure, character relationships, thematic concerns, and cultural anxieties expressed in both the film and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to demonstrate that the film argues for a worldview allowing the natural and the supernatural and the rational and the irrational to coexist. I also point to the visual references Burton makes to scenes from Roger Corman's *The Pit and the Pendulum* and Mario Bava's *La Maschera del Demonio*, illustrating the manner in which they complicate the myth's thematic concerns. My argument adds to Hand and McRoy's assertion that horror film adaptations are a form of myth-making and to the growing sense that there is more to Burton's art than flashy visuals.

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DEDICATION

To Becky Littlechilds and Ole Schenk, for fighting through our pasts with me.

In the introduction to their collection of essays entitled *Monstrous Adaptations: Generic and thematic mutations in horror film*, Hand And McRoy reveal horror film adaptations to be contributions to larger myths, rather than mere exercises in adaptation from one medium to another. They state: “The myth of a work exists at its simplest, most memorable and irreducible pattern.... A myth lives, and the ‘truth’ of it is not to be found in the earliest version but, as Levi-Strauss claims, in all its versions” (2). They point to Chris Baldick’s statement that

The vitality of myths lies precisely in their capacity for change, their adaptability and openness to new combinations of meaning. That series of adaptations, allusions, accretions, analogues, parodies, and plain misreadings which follows...is not just a supplementary component of the myth; it is the myth. (quoted in Hand and McRoy 3)

However, film adaptation as a form of myth-making is not their only concern. They also view adaptation as a theme integral to all horror films, citing horror’s primary thematic concern, the crossing of the border between life, the known, into death, the unknown, as “the ultimate and only certain adaptive journey in lived existence” (1). All horrific works deal with this theme in one way or another; it is the fear of the border between the known and the unknown that evokes the horror experienced by the viewer. Tim Burton’s film, *Sleepy Hollow*, is one adaptation that holds true to both of Hand and McRoy’s assertions.

The film’s reimagining of Washington Irving’s sketch, “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” contributes to the myth of the headless horseman, which predates Irving’s tale, by drawing from a variety of intertexts to present a complex reading of the myth’s main concern, the irrational force of the supernatural or unknowable, symbolized by the horseman lacking a head, and thus also lacking a rational faculty. Many critics of the film view its

extensive reimagining of Irving's original tale negatively, but a few critics have attempted to determine the virtue behind the massive changes. As one critic points out, "With the word "Legend" tellingly omitted from its title, the film *Sleepy Hollow* reinscribes a supernatural dimension that the tale had teasingly proposed but ultimately rejected" (Kevorkian 28). This re-imagining could be (and has been) considered Hollywood sensationalism, the corrupt system destroying a valued piece of literature for the sake of thrilling the mindless masses. I will admit that my first reaction to the film was similarly negative. As a fan of Burton's, I was impressed with the visuals, but somewhat shocked by the blatant rewrite of one of America's most famous gothic folktales.

I have come to realize, however, that the film is not simply a reimagining of the original story, but instead it uses Irving's tale as a point of departure, interpolating and expanding upon not only the headless horseman myth but also minor aspects of the folktales told to Ichabod by the women of Sleepy Hollow. The folktales are developed more fully and given a supernatural quality, such as the "woman in white, that haunted the dark glen at Raven Rock, and was often heard to shriek on winter nights before a storm" (Irving 289). The "woman in white" becomes the "Witch of the Western Wood" in the film, Lady Van Tassel's sister, who is dressed in white and is seen shrieking in the face of Ichabod at one point. Another folktale is that of Major André's tree, which is described as "tower[ing] like a giant above all the other trees of the neighbourhood, . . . Its limbs were gnarled, and fantastic, large enough to form trunks for ordinary trees, twisting down almost to the earth, and rising again into the air" (291). The description of the tree fits Burton's gothic aesthetic quite nicely, and Major André's tree becomes the "Tree of the Dead" in the film, where the

Headless Horseman emerges from when he is summoned and where he stores the heads of his victims.

In Irving's tale, the woman in white and Major André's tree are simply stories that the folk of Sleepy Hollow share around the hearth in the evening; they are not supernatural entities. Irving uses the stories to show how superstitious Ichabod Crane is, referring constantly to his voracious appetite for the supernatural, just as he refers to his voracious appetite for everything else: "His appetite for the marvelous, and his powers of digesting it, were equally extraordinary; and both had been increased by his residence in this spell bound region. No tale was too gross or monstrous for his capacious swallow" (277). It is Ichabod's single-minded greed that Irving mocks here, and it is ultimately foiled by his belief in the supernatural, which is cast as the impetus for his failure in achieving that which he hungers for: Katrina and her father's land. Thus it is clear that the film's "reinscribed supernatural dimension" is contrary to Irving's mocking tone in the source text. This supernatural dimension is fundamental to the thematic concerns of the film and finds its sources elsewhere.

The film draws from other horrific intertexts to complicate the thematic conflicts that lie at the heart of the story. The three intertexts pivotal to an understanding of *Sleepy Hollow*'s thematic concerns are *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the horror films *The Pit and the Pendulum* and *La Maschera del Demonio*.¹ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is an anonymously written medieval romance and, notably, an earlier contribution to the myth of the headless horseman. The two horror films are themselves adaptations of short stories

¹ Originally, the film was released in North America by American International Pictures in an edited form and titled *Black Sunday*. It is available on DVD under that title, but in its original cut with opening titles referring to it as *The Mask of Satan* (Commentary to *Black Sunday*). I will refer to it simply as *The Mask of Satan* from this point.

that took wild liberties in their formation; the former is Roger Corman's 1961 adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe's story of the same title, and the latter is Mario Bava's 1960 adaptation of Nikolai Gogol's short story "Viy." This combination of intertexts accounts for what Martin Kevorkian refers to as the film's "reinscribed supernatural dimension" and leads to a reimagined conception of motifs barely present in Irving's tale, but integral to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: the rational vs. the irrational, scientific method vs. religious belief, and the natural vs. the supernatural. The intertextual application of the romance becomes clear through multiple connections, but it is primarily the narrative structure of the poem and the motivating force of that narrative, Morgan Le Fay, that come to the fore as the clearest indication that the screenwriter was drawing from this specific component of the headless horseman myth. The scholarly argument surrounding the thematic relevance of Le Fay's motivations provides a route to accessing the themes of Burton's film as well, through the character Lady Van Tassel, a figure who garnered little more than a footnote in Irving's tale, when she is simply referred to as Baltus Van Tassel's "notable little wife," who is more concerned with keeping house than rearing her daughter (Irving 282).

Even though the film is very much in keeping with Burton's career-spanning artistic vision, the use of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as an intertext cannot be attributed directly to him. The film's screenplay was written by Andrew Kevin Walker and based on a story conceived by Walker and Kevin Yagher, the film's co-producer. However, the authorship is more complicated than that and may not even be attributable simply to those two; much of the criticism written about *Sleepy Hollow* has a one-line statement or a footnote alluding to Tom Stoppard's contribution to the script. Stoppard is best known in Hollywood for his reinterpretations of Shakespearean texts, first with *Rosencrantz and*

Guildestern Are Dead, in which Hamlet is retold from the perspective of two minor characters, and then with *Shakespeare in Love*, in which he draws on the plays of Shakespeare to create a pseudo-biography of the playwright, so it is believable that he would draw from a medieval British romance to update an American folktale for a contemporary audience. Edwin Page, in his book, *Gothic Fantasy: The Films of Tim Burton*, states that after Walker's adaptation, "The screenplay was then worked on extensively by British playwright Tom Stoppard," quoting Johnny Depp as saying, "Stoppard did a fabulous job" (160). In *The Cambridge Companion to Tom Stoppard*, his work on the screenplay is referred to as "uncredited contributions" (Kelly 8), and in Ira Nadel's *Tom Stoppard: A Life*, it is stated that in 1999, "Stoppard was also busy making uncredited script changes to Tim Burton's *Sleepy Hollow*, adjusting the original script by Kevin Walker" (Nadel 519). These statements leave one to wonder how deeply Stoppard was involved in this project. It is not clear whether he had done "a little work" (Burton in his commentary to the film), or if his work had been "extensive," as Page and Depp imply. One also has to wonder if his work could be classified as "contributions" or "changes." Thus, the possible origin of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as an intertext is split three ways, leading to Walker, Yagher, and Stoppard. Whether the use of the romance was purposeful is left a mystery, but there are some intriguing facts that, when combined with the textual evidence, lead one to think of it as a distinct possibility.

To further augment the motifs found in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and to fit them more closely to themes prevalent in his own work, Burton references imagery from pivotal scenes in Corman and Bava's films. These connections can most definitely be attributed to Burton himself. His films often deal in one way or another with the anxiety

experienced by the loss of a parent. This theme, one of innocence abandoned and authority lost, can be seen in almost all of Burton's films: in *Edward Scissorhands*, Edward is left to fend for himself when his creator dies of a heart-attack before replacing his scissorhands with the regular kind; in *Batman*, Bruce Wayne watches as his parents are killed in a dark alley and thus becomes Batman, the vigilante defender of Gotham City's innocents; in *Batman Returns*, the Penguin becomes a sympathetic character, abandoned by his parents because he is deformed and raised by penguins living in Gotham City's sewers; and in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, Willy Wonka is a runaway, who maintains his perpetual child-like state because his father is a cruel dentist, who wouldn't allow him to eat candy.² Burton's struggles with his own parents come up frequently in interviews, so it is not shocking that the troubled parent-child relationship, more often than not siding with an abandoned child, is a common theme in his work. In *Sleepy Hollow*, Burton deals with this theme in a blatant way, using dream sequences, which reveal the trauma of Ichabod's childhood. In the dream sequences, the audience witnesses the murder of Ichabod's mother, a witch, at the hands of his minister father. Burton uses this scene to illustrate the genesis of Ichabod's reliance on reason and logic along with the destruction of his faith in both his father's God and his mother's magic.

Through his films, Burton constantly asserts that fantasy and the unnatural are viable routes to viewing and understanding the world, and he uses his visual creativity and fantastical ideas to do so. His oeuvre in its entirety is a reassertion of the supernatural in a culture driven by logic and the scientific method. However, nowhere else in his work is this

² These are characters are just a few examples. Similar things could be said about the title character from *Ed Wood*, Lydia Deetz from *Beetlejuice*, and Pee-Wee Herman from *Pee-Wee's Big Adventure*. *Big Fish* in its entirety deals with the parent-child relationship, inverting the commonly assumed roles and making the father the imaginative and playful one.

theme dealt with as directly as it is in *Sleepy Hollow*. Ichabod Crane's entire character arc is an attempt to settle the conflict between his rational mind and his supernatural experiences. He is ultimately forced to combine the two, but, in that, he affirms that the supernatural is a tool with which to view the world, equivalent to that of scientific reason.

In *The Films of Tim Burton*, Alison McMahan argues that Burton is the foremost purveyor of a new genre of film, which she has termed "pataphysical." She states that, "These kinds of films work best with audiences that are steeped in contemporary pop culture and often play on cultural anxieties that are widely felt" (236). She further defines them as films that "cannot be viewed in isolation, but must be understood in relation to other texts" (16). By drawing from past texts, in this instance the horror films of the 1960's, and allowing them to interact with an established myth, that of the headless horseman, Burton is able to communicate to a modern audience the myth's integral anxiety concerning the irrationality of death and the unknown, while giving it focus in his own anxieties surrounding the parent-child relationship.

The films Burton draws from are themselves myth-making vehicles. They adapt established myth for a popular audience in the form of B-movies. Both Corman and Bava add to and expand upon the existing myths initiated by Poe and Gogol's works and draw the popular audience's focus to the cultural anxieties present. As a secondary function, the movies are also artifacts of cultural exchange. Bava, an Italian, exposes his culture to a myth drawn from Gogol's Russia, and, though Poe himself was American, the aesthetic of Corman's film is drawn from the Hammer films of the 1950s and 60s. The Hammer films themselves were a repatriation of British myth. They were the first popular adaptations of *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* filmed in the country of their origin and can be seen as a response

to the Universal horror adaptations of the 1930s, American films whose source material was British. This cultural exchange fuels the horror film genre; it can be seen in films as recent as the *The Ring* (2002), which is an American adaptation of the Japanese film *Ringu* (1998).³ *Sleepy Hollow* itself is an artifact of cultural exchange. Just like Corman's adaptation, the acknowledged source material is American but the British *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a clear antecedent. Burton himself admits that the aesthetic of the film is an homage to the Hammer films: "When I watched them I got joy out of them, and I tried to inject the joy that I got from them into [*Sleepy Hollow*]" (Salisbury 170). He filmed the movie in England and cast stars of the Hammer films, Christopher Lee and Michael Gough, to lend credence to his homage. He even went so far as to use methods employed by Hammer's directors to maintain a similar ambiance, such as shooting outdoor scenes on set (Salisbury 170-73). The cultural exchange illustrated by the levels of British-American transmission behind the film only highlight its roll as a myth-making vehicle, and its relationship to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* reveals the depths of this transmission.

Beyond the central anxiety mentioned above, the fear of irrational forces, *Sleepy Hollow* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* share many qualities. Character roles and relationships overlap, there is a magical love token bestowed upon the hero by his love interest, and both heroes are burdened with scars. The most notable shared quality, however, is the narrative structure, which is arguably the reason for all of the other similarities.

The obvious linking factor between the two works is the presence of a headless horseman who wanders around with an axe in an attempt to collect heads: the Green Knight

³ *Ringu* itself is an adaptation of the novel by Koji Suzuki, which is based on the Japanese mythical figure, the *onryou* or vengeful ghost (Hand and McRoy 212). For an in depth discussion of the films' cultural exchange, see Linnie Blake's contribution to *Monstrous Adaptations*, entitled "'Everyone will suffer': national identity and the spirit of subaltern vengeance in Nakata Hideo's *Ringu* and Gore Verbinski's *The Ring*."

of the romance's title and the Hessian of *Sleepy Hollow*. They are each symbolically representative of irrationality. The Hessian spends the bulk of the film without a head, whereas the Green Knight is only headless for a short time at the beginning of the poem, but the simple fact that they are each in a state of animated headlessness is easy to construe as representative of a lack of reason. Both are magical creatures, one an enchanted man and the other a ghost, and are thus aligned with the supernatural as well. Both are also the figures of horror in their respective stories. The Green Knight causes King Arthur's court considerable distress. The description of his entrance focuses on his imposing stature:

When there bursts in at the hall door a terrible figure,

In his stature the very tallest on earth.

From the waist to the neck so thick-set and square,

And his loins and his limbs so massive and long,

In truth half a giant I believe he was,

But anyway of all men I judge him the largest (136-141)

Burton highlights the imposing qualities of the Headless Horseman as well. When the audience first sees the horseman, he rushes out of the Western Woods, with the force of his entrance knocking Ichabod to the ground. He then beheads Magistrate Philipse; following which, the audience sees him from the point of view of Ichabod, from below. The imposing figure rears his horse and rushes at Ichabod, to collect the magistrate's head from where it has rolled, in between the hero's legs. Ichabod passes out from fright, only to awaken in his room at the Van Tassel's and pass out again from the memory. The imposing stature and frightening aspect of the two horsemen, along with their magical qualities and irrational animated state, draws them into parallel roles in the two narratives.

Aligning those two characters makes Ichabod Crane the equivalent of Sir Gawain, a comparison which gains more validity when one notes that his profession has changed from a schoolteacher in Irving's story to a forensic detective in the film. Orr makes much of this change in professions, drawing parallels between Ichabod's narrative in the film and that of both detective fiction and westerns. He states that authors of detective fiction "situate their detectives in the metropolis... Ichabod begins the narrative as one of these metropolitan figures" but soon becomes "an outward-bound detective" (Orr 45). Orr considers Ichabod "the exception to rather than the rule of the mystery genre" (Orr 45). These observations are made in service of his colonialist reading of the film, but are telling in that they draw focus to the uncommon aspects of Ichabod within the detective genre; he is outward-bound, sent on a quest, not unlike a knight-errant. This aspect of Ichabod's character is alluded to in Irving's original work, in which he writes, "That [Ichabod] might make his appearance before his mistress in the true style of a cavalier, he borrowed a horse from the farmer with whom he was domiciliated, ... thus gallantly mounted, issued forth like a knight-errant in quest of adventures" (Irving 284). Irving ironically refers to his superstitious schoolteacher, Crane, as a knight-errant to point to his distinct lack of courage and valour. In the film, however, Crane is portrayed as standing "for science and reason" (his "knightly virtues," replacing Gawain's loyalty and courage), and is sent on a quest to determine who is killing the residents of Sleepy Hollow. As he arrives, he states his quest: "I'm Ichabod Crane, sent to you from New York to investigate murder in Sleepy Hollow," and he is welcomed by his hosts, the Van Tassels; Lady Van Tassel states: "Then Sleepy Hollow is grateful to you Constable Crane, and we hope you will honor us by remaining in this house." That introduction is similar to Sir Gawain's arrival at Bertilak's castle. After the Christmas

festivities are finished, Bertilak takes Gawain back to his room and asks him to stay longer.

Gawain then explains to his host why it is that he cannot:

A task important and pressing drove me into the wild,
For I am summoned in person to seek out a place
With no idea whatever where it might be found.
I would not fail to reach it on New Year's morning
For all the land in England, so help me our Lord! (1051-55)

Preceding Gawain's explanation of his quest, Bertilak expresses the honor that Gawain will bestow on him by remaining in his home: "Indeed, sir, as long as I live I shall be the better / Because Gawain was my guest at God's own feast" (1035-36). Crane's shift in profession forces his character into a role similar to that of Gawain, as a man on a quest, meant to test his virtues.

The most telling connection between the film and the romance, however, is the film's focus on Lady Van Tassel, whose role bears striking resemblance to that of Morgan le Fay in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Morgan le Fay, as a character, is barely discussed in the poem. Her presence is only mentioned a few times—and these before her identity is revealed—but she plays a pivotal role in the narrative. She is the only character at the beginning of the poem's action who is familiar with all the main characters. She lives with Bertilak—the Green Knight—and his wife, and is the half-sister of Arthur, and therefore Guenevere's sister-in-law and Gawain's aunt (Gawain is referred to as Arthur's 'sistersune' in the poem).

More important than her relationships with the other characters of the poem is her role as the motivating force of the plot's action. Much scholarly attention has been paid to

this troubling detail of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Her role is not revealed until the fourth fitt, in which the Green Knight, revealing himself to be Bertilak, the man in whose house Gawain has been staying, recounts how he became enchanted: “Through the power of Morgan le Fay, who lives under my roof, / And her skill in learning, well taught in magic arts” (2446-7). He then goes on to discuss his purpose in visiting King Arthur’s court the previous Christmas:

She sent me in this shape to your splendid hall
To make trial of your pride, and to judge the truth
Of the great reputation attached to the Round table.
She sent me to drive you demented with this marvel,
To have terrified Guenevere and caused her to die
With horror at that figure who spoke like a spectre
With his head in his hand before the high table. (2456-63)

It is clear from these statements that the Green Knight was under the control of Morgan le Fay, who, motivated by the desire to test the integrity of Arthur’s court and an intense dislike of Guenevere, sent him to the court both to challenge the knights of the round table to the beheading game and to frighten the queen. After Arthur accepts this challenge, Gawain begs him to “let this task be [his]” (342). He then makes a verbal contract with the Green Knight, stating: “I am called Gawain, / Who deals you this blow, whatever happens after, / On this day next year to accept another from you / With what weapon you choose, and from no other person / on earth” (381-85). Gawain agrees that if he strikes the Green Knight’s neck with an axe and the Knight survives, Gawain must journey to the Green Knight’s

chapel to receive a blow in kind the following year. These are the facts of the text; scholars have argued over them, coming to varying conclusions.

The argument over Morgan le Fay's role in the poem started with Kittredge's book, *A Study of Gawain and the Green Knight*, and Hulbert's article, "Syr Gawayn and the Grene Knyzt," published in two parts. They were writing concurrently, but were aware of each other's work.⁴ Kittredge argues that Morgan "still remains the motive-power of the whole transaction. It is she who despatches the Green Knight to court, and it is by virtue of her charms that he is enabled to pick up his head and put it back on his shoulders: 'All this was done by enchantment that the old witch had wrought!'" (Kittredge 134). He felt that "we must ascribe the presence of Morgan...to the learned ingenuity of the English romancer, and likewise, of course, her role as the setter-in-motion of the entire plot" (Kittredge 134). He notes that her presence "may be unhesitatingly credited to the English author" and that "it can hardly have stood in his French [source]" (Kittredge 132), thus establishing that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is the only work in which Morgan le Fay appears in this role. Hulbert, when considering Bertilak's reasons for traveling to Arthur's court, states, "The explanation is one that seems to be sensible superficially but is inherently unreasonable. It was almost certainly added by some late redactor familiar with Morgan's horn and mantle tests" (Hulbert 70). Both Hulbert and Kittredge view Morgan le Fay's presence as the poet's attempt to draw his romance into the Arthurian tradition.

It is, however, in Baughan's article that we get the first discussion of the thematic relevance of Morgan's presence. He builds from Kittredge and Hulbert's argument; and as Friedman notes, he has a "dangerous unfamiliarity with romance conventions in general and

⁴ This is noted by a disclaimer attached to the second part of Hulbert's article, stating that it was in 'page-proof before the publication' of Kittredge's book, and by a footnote in Kittredge's book, referring to the first part of Hulbert's article.

Arthurian romance in particular and has badly misinterpreted the poem” (Friedman 136-37). He argues that in order to account for her presence, one must determine which of Gawain’s virtues is being tested in both the beheading game and the love test (a test in which Bertilak’s wife enters Gawain’s room at their castle each morning, acting as a temptress). Baughan misreads King Arthur’s actions during his encounter with the Green Knight. He thinks that Arthur attempts the beheading himself and fails. He thus elides Gawain’s chaste performance in the love test with his performance in the beheading game, and comes to the misguided conclusion that Gawain’s chastity is the virtue being tested. Later commentators then lambast him for his poor scholarship.

Engelhardt and Markman, determined to save the role of Morgan le Fay from being misunderstood at the hands of Baughan, each add their interpretations. With Kittredge and Hulbert being somewhat dismissive of the author’s artistry, viewing Morgan’s role as “a substitution and excrescent” (Friedman 136), and Baughan’s thematic argument being dismissible due to his poor scholarship, the argument for thematic relevance had not been given much serious thought.

Engelhardt takes a distinctly Christian view of the poem. He sees it as “a humane and sympathetic presentation designed to reveal how human and imperfect is even a supposedly perfect knight such as...Gawain” (Engelhardt, footnote 14, 225). Engelhardt identifies Gawain’s integrity as what is to be tested by Morgan le Fay’s plan: “it is this integrity in Gawain which the poem will show to be more apparent than real” (Engelhardt 218). With Gawain forced into a position where he is proven to act imperfectly, Engelhardt argues that Morgan le Fay and Bertilak destroy Gawain’s virtuous perfection. He shows that Gawain “endeavored to safeguard his body by magic and his soul by a false confession. Thus,

incongruously, the exemplar of piety took refuge in superstition and a false conscience” (Engelhardt 222). In his conclusion, Engelhardt reinforces the religious nature of the poet’s moral: “He did not inveigh against Gawain’s secularism. Gawain had resisted the flesh, he had defied the devil, he had succumbed to the world, and he had come to know himself” (Engelhardt 225). It is Gawain’s pride in his perfection and, by extension, the court’s pride in its perfection that is deflated by Morgan le Fay. This reading is supported both by Bertilak’s own words—“She sent me in this shape to your splendid hall / To make trial of your pride, and to judge the truth / Of the great reputation attached to the Round table” (2456-58)—and by the court’s adoption of the green girdle as a symbol of their renown, after Gawain admits to it being “a token of the dishonesty [he] was caught committing” (2509).

Markman, too, notes that Gawain’s integrity was in the balance, but he refers to Gawain’s abandonment of his virtue in the face of the supernatural as “the slightest compromise” (Markman 584) and completely ignores Gawain’s apparent guilt regarding the “slight” scar on his neck and the belt that caused it, evinced in his final speech (584):

This belt caused the scar that I bear on my neck;
This is the injury and damage I have suffered
For the cowardice and covetousness that seized me there;
This is the token of the dishonesty I was caught committing,
And now I must wear it as long as I live.
For a man may hide his misdeed, but never erase it,
For where once it takes root the stain can never be lifted. (2506-12)

Gawain wears the belt as a reminder of his cowardice and covetousness and, as previously mentioned, as a token of his dishonesty. It appears as though Gawain would consider his armor much more sullied than Markman does, referring to his misdeed as a “stain,” which “can never be lifted.” Throughout his argument, Markman appears to be blinded by a love of and belief in the beauty of humanity, which, as Engelhardt has shown, the poet does not share.

One element of the poem that Friedman points to illuminates and expands on what Markman referred to as “its forceful presentation of its human hero” (Markman 586). Friedman notes that through “the poet’s skill in reporting during the bedroom conversations not only the speeches of Gawain and the lady but also his thoughts and dreams, we come to know Gawain’s processes of mind intimately, and for that reason can decide definitely what is at stake in the Temptation” (Friedman 144). Following this, Friedman illustrates that it is Gawain’s sense of duty that is at stake, not his chastity, but in doing so draws the reader’s attention to the psychological nature of the poem. This attention to Gawain’s thoughts and dreams may account for the ‘human’ aspects of this romance, particularly when compared to its contemporary romances, in which it was not a common practice to portray a knight’s thoughts.

Gawain’s virtue and great faith are mentioned multiple times throughout the poem, most notably on his journey from Arthur’s court to Bertilak’s castle. The poet states that “all his earthly faith was in the five wounds / That Christ suffered on the cross, as the creed declares” (642-43). As he traveled toward his fate at the hand of the Green Knight “He often crossed himself / Crying, ‘Prosper me, Christ’s blood!’” (759-62). The poet also states that Gawain owes his life to God, “Had he not been valiant and resolute, trusting in God, / He

would have died or been killed many times” (724-25). Gawain is cast as a man of God to make his undoing at the hand of Morgan le Fay that much more powerful in the context of a Christian culture. And as Engelhardt denotes, Gawain’s primary failure is that of his piety, that in his “supreme predicament, Gawain put his faith in a talisman” (Engelhardt 222).

Gawain’s downfall lies in a complex of verbal contracts that he agrees to. The first contract is that of the beheading game in the first fitt, as mentioned above. The second contract is with Bertilak at the end of the second fitt. Bertilak states, “Whatever I catch in the wood shall become yours, / and whatever mishap comes your way give me in exchange” (1106-7). Gawain agrees emphatically and swears by God that he will hold to this contract. This deal is commonly known as the exchange of winnings. Bertilak brings the carcasses from his hunting trips home for Gawain, and Gawain in return passes along the kisses he receives from the lady of the house. On the third day of the agreement, however, the lady offers him more than a kiss. She first offers him a ring, to which Gawain replies: “I want no gifts, I swear, dear lady, at this time” (1822). She then offers him her girdle, informing him that “whoever is buckled into this green belt, / As long as it is tightly fastened about him / There is no man on earth who can strike him down, / For he cannot be killed by any trick in the world” (1851-4). Gawain accepts this gift, feeling its magic will protect him from his imminent beheading. Lady Bertilak requires Gawain to keep this gift a secret; Gawain consents, forming his third and final verbal contract, “But in that very act he proved ungenerous, and therefore discourteous, to her husband; he sinned against piety and derogated from his valor” (Engelhardt 222). Here, Engelhardt comments on Gawain’s will, stating that he, “had willfully placed himself in a new dilemma; he could not fulfill one

compact without breaking the other” (Engelhardt 222). It is the conflict of these contracts that leads to Gawain’s undoing.

These three verbal contracts, the beheading game, the exchange of winnings, and the love token, come together at the crux of the narrative, which occurs shortly before Bertilak reveals his identity and the identity of Morgan le Fay. After having gone to confession, where he did not confess to breaking his contract, Gawain arrives at the Green Chapel, anticipating the strike of the Green Knight’s axe. He has already destroyed his integrity by having chosen to put his faith in the magic of the green girdle over choosing to put his faith in God, whom the poet has stated kept Gawain safe before. In favour of his verbal contract with Lady Bertilak, and in an effort to avoid having his head lopped off by the Green Knight, he breaks his contract with Bertilak, not knowing that Bertilak and the Green Knight are one-and-the-same.

The Green Knight swings his axe down three times, and on the third stroke nicks Gawain’s neck. He then explains to Gawain the complex of contracts that he, Gawain, has sworn himself into, that he was dealing with the same man under two contracts, and that he had failed the exchange of winnings by not giving Bertilak the green girdle, thus was nicked with the blade on the third swing. Gawain, at this point, recognizes what he has done: “He endeavored to safeguard his body by magic and his soul by a false confession. Thus, incongruously, the exemplar of piety took refuge in superstition and a false conscience” (Engelhardt 222). Following this realization, Gawain willingly admits his sin to Bertilak, who willingly forgives him of it. When Gawain returns to Arthur’s court, he relates his failings to the court and they forgive him as well. The only character in the poem who does not feel Gawain’s confession of sin is enough to absolve him of said sin is Gawain himself.

He says, “a man may hide his misdeed, but never erase it, / For where once it takes root the stain can never be lifted” (2511-12)—he has sullied his armor. He has confessed, has a scar on his neck for penance, has been absolved by both of the men he sinned against, Bertilak and Arthur, but still feels guilt and shame. His inability to accept that his sins have been forgiven denotes a lack of faith in Christ, who, according to the Christian faith, will forgive sins if the sinner is truly repentant, which Gawain clearly is. He is unable to accept the redemptive quality of forgiveness inherent in Christian doctrine. In destroying Gawain’s faith in God, Morgan le Fay truly does destroy his integrity. She exploits the weaknesses of King Arthur’s court by sending the man she controls to the court to challenge one of its members.

Morgan le Fay is transposed in the narrative of *Sleepy Hollow* as Lady Van Tassel, the woman who controls the Headless Horseman. She is embittered at one of the village’s most highly respected citizens, Peter Van Garrett, for evicting her, her mother, and her sister from their home after her father passed away. As a child she sells her soul to Satan in an attempt to make all of Van Garrett’s belongings her own. However, her route to this inheritance becomes complicated. She manipulates the Headless Horseman into beheading anyone who stands in her way so that she can more quickly acquire Van Garrett’s possessions, which she views as a legacy belonging to her. By being the woman behind the headless figure, Lady Van Tassel sets in motion the events of the film’s narrative in the same manner that Morgan le Fay does in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. As Kittredge and Hulbert prove, that particular romance is the only tale of its kind in which Morgan le Fay is the enchantress, and therefore it is the only tale of its kind in which the enchantress has a personal grudge against those she is attacking. Thus, Burton’s film aligns specifically

with this anonymous tale, and not with other versions of the beheading myth involving Gawain.

It is Lady Van Tassel's vengeful actions, and no one else's, that precipitate Ichabod Crane's arrival in Sleepy Hollow and cause his belief in science and reason to be tested. At the beginning of the film, Ichabod stands in court, arguing for the relevance of forensic science in the realm of the law, stating: "We must use our brains to detect vital clues using up-to-date scientific equipment." In an attempt to humiliate him, the judge sends him on a quest to solve the series of beheadings in Sleepy Hollow: "You will take these experimentations of yours to Sleepy Hollow, and there you will detect the murderer, bring him here to face our good justice. Will you do this?" To which Crane responds: "I shall." The judge challenges him: "Remember, it is you, Ichabod Crane, who is now put to the test."

Upon arriving in Sleepy Hollow, Crane's faith is tested almost immediately. After being settled in the Van Tassel's home, he is informed that not only have the bodies been found beheaded, but the heads themselves are missing. He is informed of the legend of the Hessian Mercenary, who was beheaded with his own sword and buried in the Western Woods. In Irving's original tale, the Hessian's head was shot off by a cannon (Irving 273). This particular change from the tale is significant, in that the manner in which the Hessian loses his head is similar to the manner in which the Green Knight loses his, by his own weapon. Crane does not believe this tale until later when he has his first face-to-neck run-in with the Headless Horseman, recounted above. Here is one point where the two stories differ; Crane's faith in science and reason is first tested during his initial run-in with the decapitated Hessian, not at the story's climax, when Gawain's faith is tested in his tale.

A significant similarity to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is the gift of a love token from Baltus Van Tassel's daughter, Katrina. She offers Crane a gift in the form of a book of magic spells, entitled: *A Compendium of Spells, Charms and Devices of the Spirit World*. Katrina tells Crane that he should "Keep it close to [his] heart; it is sure protection from harm". This echoes of the green girdle given to Gawain by Lady Bertilak, a magical artifact that has powers of protection, given to the hero by a love interest. During the poem's climax, Gawain's token supposedly enchants him and saves him from being struck down by the Green Knight's axe. In the climax to the film, Ichabod's love token saves his life by (un-magically) stopping a bullet from entering his chest. Gawain's experience leaves him with a scar that he bears until his death, whereas Ichabod's experience does not scar him, physically.

One key difference between the two works is the matter of the character's scars, because Gawain acquires his during the poem's narrative, but Crane acquires his before his narrative begins. Gawain's scar is acquired within the timeline of the tale, and close to the end, at that. The entire poem leads up to the moment where he gets nicked on the neck. That moment defines Gawain's loss of faith, and the scar acts as a constant reminder of his failing. Crane's scars, however, are seen almost immediately in the film. As he travels to Sleepy Hollow in the opening credits, the audience sees him examining some strange marks on the palms of his hands while he plays with his autopsy tools and flips through his notebook, which contains a side-by-side comparison of "Criminal Investigation by Forced Confession" and "Reason and Deduction;" Ichabod's neat script sides with the latter as the only route to "Detect the Truth." The marks on his palms are a series of small dots. It is not shown until much later, in the dream sequences, that they are the result of pushing his hands

down on the armrests of an interrogation chair⁵ upon discovering his mother's lifeless body trapped in an iron maiden. Following this sequence, Crane explains his traumatic event to Katrina:

Ichabod: "My mother was an innocent, a child of nature, condemned, murdered, by my father...Murdered to save her soul, by a bible black tyrant behind a mask of righteousness. I was seven when I lost my faith"

Katrina: "What do you believe in?"

Ichabod: "Sense and reason, cause and consequence. I should not have come to this place. Where my rational mind has been so controverted by the spirit world"

Any other information regarding Crane's childhood is relayed through the dream sequences, offering insight into his motivations, similar to the attention to Gawain's thoughts and dreams that Friedman pointed to. The dream sequence that precedes Ichabod's explanation of his loss of faith is of particular interest, because it is here that Burton visually references both *The Pit and the Pendulum* and *The Mask of Satan*,⁶ drawing upon the thematic elements of those movies to further enrich his own.

In the opening scene of *The Mask of Satan*, Asa, a woman who the film never quite makes clear is a witch or a vampire, is killed for purportedly practicing witchcraft; she is tied to a stake and the spiked "mask of Satan" is then placed over her face and brutally pounded into place by an executioner. As the mallet pulls back, the audience witnesses her blood pouring from the mask, signifying her death. Burton visually links Ichabod's dream

⁵ An interrogation chair was a torture device, similar in construction to an electric chair. The entire surface of the device was covered in tiny spikes. The victim would be stripped naked and strapped into the chair and the torturer would apply force to any part of the victim's body, causing the spikes to penetrate (<http://www.occasionalhell.com/infdevice/detail.php?recordID=Interrogation%20Chair>).

⁶ In each film, a woman is killed, a common enough horror trope, but in both cases the woman is played by Barbara Steele. One can assume that Burton conflated the scenes from the two films because of the actress linking them.

sequence to this scene in a visceral way, by having Ichabod's mother's blood pour forth from the iron maiden when it pops open. The two films are further aligned visually by the pockmarks left by the spikes of the iron maiden on Ichabod's mother's face, which directly reference the pockmarks left on the witch's face by the mask of Satan. This scene marks *The Mask of Satan* as an intertext, drawing from Bava both visually and thematically to make Ichabod's mother not only a nearly identical pock-marked and bleeding victim of murder but also to make her, like Asa, a woman killed for practicing witchcraft. The thematic conflict in *Sleepy Hollow* may not be as blatant as the conflict between the Christians and the Satanists in *The Mask of Satan*, but Ichabod's mother is portrayed as representing a belief system at odds with his father's tyrannical Christianity. Her witchcraft is not aligned with Satan but with nature, casting her magic as childlike and whimsical rather than evil, but she is still "magical" which is placed in stark contrast to her husband's rigid Christianity.

Burton complicates this conflict by placing the visual reference to Bava's film into an environment and situation lifted directly from Corman's *The Pit and the Pendulum*, which brings with it its own thematic conflicts. Once again, the film referenced becomes an intertext, valuable for its illumination of a piece of *Sleepy Hollow*'s thematic puzzle. In *The Pit and the Pendulum*, Vincent Price's character, Nicholas, is haunted by the childhood experience of stumbling across his father's torture chamber, where he watches his father kill his uncle and torture his mother for having an affair. The dream sequence in *Sleepy Hollow* recreates this scene. Ichabod enters the torture chamber at the back of his father's church; here he sees his mother's terror-filled eyes staring back at him from inside an iron maiden. He falls back in horror, landing on the interrogation chair, acquiring the scars on his hands. As he approaches the iron maiden, the doors fling open and his mother's now lifeless and

pockmarked body falls toward him, bringing with it the torrents of blood mentioned before. Ichabod's experience becomes the impetus for putting his faith in the rational tenets of scientific method, having lost faith in his father's religious doctrine and his mother's magical traditions. Nicholas, however, is driven mad by his experience, ultimately reenacting his father's crimes by killing his best friend and locking his wife, played by Barbara Steele, into an iron maiden. In the final shot of the film, the camera focuses on her, gagged and trapped inside the maiden, incapable of moving without being pierced by the spikes lining its walls. It is the look in her eyes that is reenacted in Ichabod's mother's eyes, and thus these are the characters who are aligned in this intertext. Nicholas' wife is tortured for her infidelity. Therefore the thematic conflict borrowed from *The Mask of Satan*, that of Christian versus Witch, is complicated by a negation of fidelity. It is not simply that Ichabod's mother is practicing witchcraft that is his father's issue, but that this witchcraft is a sign of her lack of faith in God. This may seem straightforward enough, but it separates Christianity from the realm of the supernatural. It compartmentalizes it as an aspect, but not the sole representative, of the supernatural.

Burton uses a visual cue to relate the anxiety surrounding irrationality not only to the situation and conflicts he has borrowed from Bava and Corman for the dream sequence but also more directly to the parent-child relationship. Young Ichabod watches his father leave the room, in which he has just tortured his wife, and after passing Ichabod, his head is hidden by the collar of his cape and we see a headless figure walking out the door. This image encourages the audience to view both Crane's father and the headless horseman as representative figures of the irrational, something not based in "sense and reason, cause and consequence": his father represents religion and the headless horseman represents the

supernatural in general. Ichabod's scars on his hands are from the moment he permanently lost his faith in God, not the moment he permanently lost his faith in the supernatural. His faith in God is not recoverable, but his faith in the supernatural is.

His faith in the supernatural is reasserted upon his first run-in with the Headless Horseman, but it is confirmed during the film's climax. Lady Van Tassel has given away her secret; she has informed Katrina of her power over the Horseman. In the climax, she is holding Katrina, waiting for the Horseman to come and decapitate the girl, so that Van Garrett's fortune will be hers, because Katrina is the last obstacle in her way. She shoots Crane to keep him away. The bullet goes straight into *The Compendium of Spells, Charms and Devices of the Spirit World*, kept precisely where Katrina had asked him to keep it, "close to [his] heart," and Crane's life is metaphorically saved by magic but actually saved by rational means. Lady Van Tassel is not as successful as Morgan le Fay in her attempt at revenge. She fails in her vengeful pursuit and is taken to hell by the very demon she was controlling. However, in the process of the film's narrative, Ichabod Crane's faith in the supernatural is reasserted by her hand, complicating his faith in science and reason.

There is no definitive statement from Andrew Kevin Walker, the film's screenwriter, that he purposefully drew the film's narrative structure and character relationships from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but the evidence implies that he must have. *Sleepy Hollow* builds on the thematic elements of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* by mirroring its structural elements and drawing in other intertexts to complicate otherwise simplified dichotomies. Where Gawain's faith in God is subordinated by reason, Ichabod's faith in reason is complicated by the supernatural; he does not lose one to the other as Gawain does, but has to learn to balance the two.

Burton's film argues that science and reason are not the only routes to understanding our world, that belief in the unbelievable, that which exists outside of reason, also has its part to play in explaining aspects of our existence. The intertexts come together to work through anxieties prevalent both in Burton's work, the troubled relationship between child and parents, and in the myth of the headless horseman, the struggle to come to terms with the irrationality of death and the unknown. Burton's film implies that in a culture increasingly stripped of systems of guidance, such as religious principles, one must continue to use the supernatural to explain that which science and reason cannot. Arnold noted this thematic assertion in his study of the film's gender-roles. He states:

If Irving's tale is about the conflict between the magical and the practical, Walker's is about the coalescence of the two, of the practical leavened and softened by the salubrious influence of the magical, a kind of pre-Oedipal reunification of the masculine and feminine, of the self and the other. Science at this early stage is no match for the woman-centered narratives of the imagination, the woman-controlled realm of the supernatural: it is only when Crane gives himself to these narratives, and to Katrina, when he reconnects to the feminine sphere lost with the death of his mother, that his insights become effective. (Arnold 37)

It is Ichabod's acceptance of the supernatural as a part of his world that allows him to complete his quest and test his skills in ratiocination, discovering the true culprit behind the beheadings. The film manages to augment the myth of the headless horseman by drawing from both of its immediate source texts, "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and to align it with Burton's body of work by incorporating visual elements from other horror adaptations. It could even be said that those latter intertexts are

integral to the augmentation of the myth in that they strengthen and complicate the dichotomies present in the myth, thus shaping a new perspective of the myth's primary anxiety.

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