1866 2016

ACADEMIA ROMÂNĂ

150 de ani

în serviciul Națiunii Române

Adina Hulubaș este cercetător ştiinţific la Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide" al Academiei Române – Filiala Iaşi. Doctor în filologie din anul 2008 cu lucrarea *Trasee iniţiatice în folclorul literar românesc. Structuri stilistice*. Volumul *Obiceiuri de naştere din Moldova: tipologie şi corpus de texte*, distins cu premiul „Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu" al Academiei Române pentru anul 2012, a fost continuat cu lucrarea *Credinţe despre naştere în contextul urban din Moldova. Memoria tradiţională*.

Ioana Repciuc este cercetător științific la Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide" al Academiei Române – Filiala Iași. Doctor în filologie din anul 2011 al Universității „Alexandru Ioan Cuza" din Iași. A editat (în colaborare) *Flores Philologiae. Omagiu profesorului Eugen Munteanu, la împlinirea vârstei de 60 de ani*. A publicat două cărți de etnologie și socio-antropologie, precum și numeroase articole de specialitate.

Referenți științifici:
Cercetător științific principal gradul I dr. Cristina-Michaela Florescu
Profesor universitar dr. Nicu Gavriluță

Redactor: Mariana Codruţ
Tehnoredactare: Luminița Răducanu
Coperta: Manuela Oboroceanu

ISBN: 978-606-714-317-1

700109 – Iaşi, str. Pinului, nr. 1A, tel./fax: (0232) 314947
http:// www.editura.uaic.ro e-mail: editura@uaic.ro

Adina Hulubaș și **Ioana Repciuc**
(editori)

Riturile de trecere în actualitate

The Rites of Passage Time after Time

Editura Universității „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” Iaşi
2016

Descrierea CIP a Bibliotecii Naţionale a României
Riturile de trecere în actualitate = The Rites of Passage Time after Time
/ ed.: Adina Hulubaş, Ioana Repciuc. - Iaşi:
Editura Universităţii „Al. I. Cuza", 2016
Conţine bibliografie
ISBN 978-606-714-317-1

I. Hulubaş, Adina (ed.)
II. Repciuc, Ioana (ed.)

392
393

CUPRINS

SIR GAWAIN AND THE RITUAL PROCESS

J.S. Mackley

Introduction

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight was written in the late fourteenth century in a dialect from Cheshire, England. It exists in a single manuscript held in the British Library with the shelf mark, Cotton Nero A.x., where it is bound with three other texts named *Pearl*, *Patience* and *Cleanness*. Unlike these texts, which are of a devotional nature, *Gawain* is a Romance adventure set in the time of King Arthur.

A short summary cannot do justice to the intricacies of *Gawain* and the reader is directed to some of the enormous body of literature that has been written on this subject – including Davenport (1978), Putter (1996), Brewer and Gibson (1998), Burrow (2001), and Spearing (2010). *Gawain* is filled with masterfully controlled language as well as symbolism and numerology. It also evidences one of the earliest descriptions of Christmas feasting in English literature, and has resonances of Pagan practices. This chapter focuses on using Arnold van Gennep's *Rites of Passage* as a means of interpreting *Gawain* through the lens of anthropological folklore. The backdrop of the story of *Gawain* is that of the court of Camelot and the Knights of the Round Table, which van Gennep would describe as a *magico-religious* fraternity (1960: 76). The quest that Gawain faces is a rite of passage in that, following the challenge set by the Green Knight, Gawain must leave Camelot to find the Green Chapel (preliminary separation), he goes through the test with the Green Knight (liminal testing and transition), and then returns to Camelot for the postliminary rites of incorporation. While van Gennep notes that transitions "from one social situation to the next are looked on as implicit in the very fact of existence" (1960: 3), Gawain differs from the usual practice in that his "transition" is from a higher caste (his self-perception of perfection) to a lower status (his realisation of his limitations) (1960: 11, 102). This

discussion will also examine other examples of ritual symbolism, and hints of Celtic ritual practise throughout the text.

The Challenge

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight begins as the young court of Camelot celebrates a fifteen-day feast for Christmas and New Year, but the festivities are stopped with the arrival of a knight whose skin, hair, beard, clothes and even his horse, are all green. While the court marvel at this manifestation, which they speculate could be a phantom or from the faerie realms (l. 240), the Green Knight challenges the court: he will stand a blow from any of the knights, and will deliver a return stroke a year later. In return, the Green Knight offers to give his challenger his battle-axe "as a gift" (l. 289). Initially, no one answers, and the Green knight mocks the court, describing them as "beardless children" (l. 280). Incensed, Arthur begins to take the challenge, but he is prevented by his nephew, Gawain, who asks to take it himself. The Green Knight asks Gawain's name, and it pleases him that it is to be Gawain who takes the challenge. He asks Gawain to repeat the terms of the agreement: "I am called Gawain, who offers you this blow, whatever happens afterwards, and at this time a year hence will take another from you with whatever weapon you wish" (ll. 381-4). Once the contract has been established, the Green Knight bears his neck, and Gawain chops off his head. While this should have been sufficient to incapacitate the knight, the decapitated body picks up the head, and reminds Gawain of his contract, to seek him out at the Green Chapel in a year's time.

The time that the Green Knight appears is of particular significance: van Gennep notes that "rites of passage which conform to the usual pattern are found in the ceremonies pertaining to the seasons which often fall at the time of the summer and winter solstices" (1960: 179). In particular, he highlights the period of the Twelve Days between Christmas or the solstice and Epiphany as a transitional period, linking the practice of Christmas with the Roman festival of Saturnalia. While van Gennep avoids discussion about Saturnalia, he refers to Fowler's study, *The Roman Festivals*, where Saturnalia is described as "a general

human instinct to rest and enjoy oneself about the time of the winter solstice", and where slaves are served by their masters (Fowler 268-273).

We may consider the Green Knight's arrival in relation to van Gennep's discussion of the arrival of the stranger. He observes that "a stranger is sacred, endowed with magico-religious powers, and supernaturally benevolent or malevolent" (1960: 26). The Green Knight presents a series of contradictions: he appears human, but has a supernatural, green hue; he is handsome and terrifying; he carries a heavy axe in one hand, and a holly branch – a symbol of peace – in the other. All of this makes his true intention ambiguous. Before entering into an agreement, the Green Knight asks Gawain's name. It then follows that the procedure of insisting that Gawain repeats the contract of the agreement (even though Gawain has not been told all the conditions to which he is agreeing) is, as van Gennep would argue, a "direct rite" along the lines of a spell or a curse – "designed to produce results immediately" (1960: 8). The act of decapitation itself contains multiple symbolism: that the Green Knight is carrying a holly branch evokes the image of the Holly King, a pagan personification of the seasons, who seizes power from the Oak King during winter. Thus, the "defeat" of the Green Knight by Gawain denotes the defeat of the Winter by the Summer so the seasons can progress towards Spring as advanced by Frazer (*iv* 254-61). Frazer also describes how rituals were performed on St George's Day to ensure fertility, either for the crops or for the women. A sacrifice is necessary so the divine spirit in him might be transferred to the successor (Frazer *ii* 88-94).

Van Gennep notes that the ritual of meeting with a stranger may include actual contact (1960: 28). He further cites an example of "the violent blow with a stick given by a slave (…) to a new master he has chosen for himself" (1960: 39). With this in mind, we can consider the blow delivered by Gawain to the Green Knight as a transition of power, and another example of how Gawain becomes subservient to the Green Knight. In order to be released from this authority, Gawain becomes a neophyte who must graduate to the next level, and this is achieved when the Green Knight delivers the return blow at the end of the text. In addition, while there are religious (as well as physical and practical reasons) for a rite involving "cutting something" in various societies, the

act of Gawain decapitating the Green Knight's head is, as van Gennep notes, a rite of separation (1960: 54). Thus, by telling the Green Knight his name, by agreeing to a contract, and by striking "his master", Gawain transfers the authority to the Green Knight, and he further, symbolically, separates himself from his own society at Camelot until such time as he has undertaken the test to return home.

Thus, Gawain takes on the role of a pre-liminal neophyte who must leave the comfort of his own environment and complete the rituals to allow him to return to, and be accepted by his social order. As van Gennep notes of a traveller leaving his home, "it would be surprising if he could leave it without the performance of ceremonies which signify the reverse of the rites of incorporation" (1960: 35). For Gawain, the sequence where he puts on his armour (ll. 566-618) is akin to those arming scenes of Athena (*Iliad* 8) and Odysseus and Diomedes in *The Iliad* (*Iliad* 10). Through this we discern something of Gawain's character: the design on a broad silken band attached to Gawain's helmet is so intricate, it is as though many women had worked on it for many years. This silk is also embroidered with parrots, turtle-doves and love knots, all symbols of love or lechery. These small details reveal something about Gawain's character and his reputation with the ladies, which is more clearly delineated in other Romances featuring Gawain, but is only hinted at here. It is this reputation that is exploited by the Lady when Gawain is in Castle Hautdesert.

A significant portion of the arming sequence is spent describing Gawain's shield, which depicts a five-pointed star known as the Seal of Solomon, also known as "the endless knot" (l. 630). This star symbolises the five virtues which govern Gawain's chivalric ideals and his perception of himself as the "Perfect Knight". On the inside of Gawain's shield is a depiction of the Virgin Mary, marking him as a Christian, chivalric knight.

The arming sequence echoes van Gennep's observation of the rite of putting on clothes for the first time as a rite of separation and this motif is repeated when Gawain leaves the Lord's castle at the end of the text (1960: 53-4). Indeed, believing that Gawain is going to meet his death, those who watch him leave remark that "it is a pity that you, sir, should be lost, you who are so noble of life" (ll. 674-5).

The Green Knight as the Seasons

One frequent interpretation of the Green Knight is that of the personification of a vegetation deity. The description of the Green Knight in *Gawain* matches Frazer's description of the King of the May, who is "is completely concealed in a May-bush, wears a wooden crown wreathed with flowers, and carries a wooden sword (Frazer *ii* 85). This is seen at the beginning of the second part of *Gawain*, where the text describes the changing of the seasons as Gawain anticipates his journey in search of the Green Chapel. Van Gennep describes how the seasons are a new threshold to cross: "the season of summer and winter, of the season or a year", which are themselves subjected to the rites associated with a fruitful harvest (1960: 179, 189). If we consider the Green Knight in this heathen personification, then it is appropriate that the first part of Gawain's ritual is to cross a wilderness. He leaves on November 2nd, All Souls' Day, symbolically bringing his soul into play.

In his discussion of funeral rites, van Gennep notes that some cultures believed that "the dead go by a long and tortuous route towards the north, where the dark cold land of the dead is located" (1960: 150). The text of *Gawain* describes how he travels north through the realm of Logres and Wales, linked to some of the funerary rituals described by van Gennep. The encounter with the Green Knight at Camelot represented the preliminary rites, and so the transition through the wilderness, as well as the testing in castle Hautdesert, act as the transitional period (1960: 150). Van Gennep notes that the vegetation rites of many cultures are dramatisations, most particularly as rites of incorporation (including sacrifice and funeral rites for cultures that believe in reincarnation) (1960: 182). This also links to the veneration of trees, as Gawain symbolically passes the oak, hazel and hawthorn. The oak, venerated by druids, also symbolised Oðin, the god of the sky, and was said to assist travellers (Davidson 1988: 37), and the hazel nut gave wisdom (*ibidem*: 26); however, the hawthorn is sometimes considered to be a portal to the Faerie Otherworld, giving an additional suggestion of the supernatural.

Also, during the course of this journey, Gawain crosses by "the fords", and (presumably) fords the river Dee at Holywell to reach the

Wirral – a peninsula in northwest England (ll. 699-701). Linked with the crossing of the surging stream at the Green Chapel, these three water crossings could equate to the Celtic ritual of triple baptism and be a symbol of rebirth (Gennep 1960: 95; Warren 1881: 64-5), or even the passing to the Otherworld (Patch 1950: 62, McCulloch 1911: 87-88). The symbolic rebirth has already been demonstrated through the decapitation and survival of the Green Knight. It is repeated as Gawain passes through the wilderness, which serves as a liminal space to partition the civilisations of Camelot and Castle Hautdesert. The wilderness is inhabited by wild animals (wolves, bears and boars), as well as wild men, giants and dragons, all of which Gawain must overcome. However, having reached the comfort of the castle, Gawain must then leave once more, back into the wilderness, to face the Green Knight's final challenge.

Castle Hautdesert

Having travelled through the wilderness for 53 days, Gawain does not find anyone who can tell him of the location of the Green Chapel, despite the Green Knight's assurances that he is "widely known" (l. 454). Gawain prays that he may find a location where he may hear mass for Christmas. Van Gennep describes prayer as an animistic and positive, but ultimately indirect, rite (1960: 8). That said, it is immediately afterwards, almost in response to Gawain's prayer and triple genuflection, that Gawain finds the castle (l. 763). In order to get into the castle, Gawain must first get past the porter – who, of course, swears by St Peter, the porter of heaven! (l. 813) Thus Gawain is transitioned from questing knight to welcome guest. As van Gennep explains, "the door is the boundary between the foreign and domestic worlds in the case of an ordinary dwelling, [and] between the profane and sacred worlds in the case of a temple. Therefore, to cross the threshold is to unite oneself with a new world" (1960: 20). Once accepted into this new world, Gawain is welcomed by the Lord of the castle and invited to share his hospitality. This involves a fasting meal on Christmas Eve (although these meals are still decadent as fish is the food of fasting, and these fish are cooked in multiple ways with myriad sauces). In addition to van Gennep, who sees fasting as an

incorporation ritual linked with baptism (1960: 95), Crawley highlights that fasting was to "prevent 'evil spirits' from entering the body", and thus it acts as a unifying force among social groups standing against evil (Crawley 1902: 154).

The fast of Christmas Eve is followed by three days of feasting as well as drinking copious amounts of alcohol (l. 901). During this time, Gawain is made welcome by everyone in the Lord's court, and is introduced to the Lord's wife after hearing mass, where he "embraces in his arms a little. [And] He kisses her fittingly and speaks in a courtly manner" (ll. 973-4). For the meals on Christmas Day, he is placed in a position of honour next to the Lord's wife. Accompanying the Lady is an "aged woman" who is "highly honoured by men about her, although very little else is said about her until the end of the text (ll. 948-9). Trumbull refers to this drinking of drink as a "covenant-pledge" (Trumbull 1893: 191), and van Gennep would consider it as a "sacred act of communion" (1960: 29) which serves as a rite of incorporation (1960: 132).

The Lord invites Gawain to stay longer, wondering "what terrible deed had compelled him to ride away so eagerly from the king's court all by himself at that festal time, before the holidays were completely over" (ll. 1047-9). Gawain tells him of his commitment to find the Green Chapel, and the Lord explains that the chapel is just a short distance away, and that Gawain can rest and enjoy his hospitality until the time of his encounter. The Lord offers him a further "reward" – that he, the Lord, will go out hunting and whatever he "wins", he will give to Gawain. In return, Gawain will stay in the castle and will give to the Lord whatever he "wins". They drink to seal the bargain.

At first glance, it would appear that this is an example of the Lord's generosity, but as the Lord goes hunting the following morning, the Lord's wife enters Gawain's bedchamber while he is still sleeping. The Lady's communication with Gawain underscores her sexual aggression. While all of this presents an image of a ritualistic love rite, and a Rite of Incorporation, it is Gawain who is trying to flee from these circumstances, while the Lady remains verbally dominant throughout and thus the text subverts the readers' expectations.

Anything other than an overview of these scenes is beyond the remit of this paper, suffice it to say that that the Lady draws on knowledge of Gawain's reputation with women as seen in other romances, such as *Gawain and the Turk*, *Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle* and *The Weddyng of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell.* The Lady's advances range from the subtle to the blatant, but Gawain manages to outmanoeuvre her on two occasions and he concedes only kisses, which he "exchanges" with his host on his return in the evening. The Lord enquires where Gawain "found" these kisses, but Gawain observes that telling him was not part of the bargain; after all, he could hardly tell his host about his wife's attempts at seduction. On these two days, the Lord hunts first a herd of deer and then a ferocious boar. For Trumbull, blood sacrifice is a means of "inter-communion with the gods" (1893: 159). Here we might consider hunting as a representation of ritual sacrifice; each of the animals reflects Gawain behaviour in the bed chamber (timid like a deer on the first day, brave like the boar on the second day). In effect, the killing of these animals acts as a totem to both foreshadow the monstrous encounter at the Green Chapel, and, at the same time, become a vicarious sacrifice to take place instead of Gawain.

On the third day, however, while the Lord is hunting – and his only prey is a fox – the Lady increases her rhetoric and requests of Gawain to "give me something as your gift, your glove for example, so that I may think of you, sir, to lessen my grief" (ll. 1799-1800). When this is not forthcoming – Gawain has no retainers to carry such fineries – she initially offers Gawain a valuable ring, and when he declines, she suggests a green silk girdle which she explains will make him impervious to the Green Knight's blade. Gawain keeps this, not as a love token, but as a means of saving his own life, as well as a means of getting the Lady to leave. He wraps the girdle around his waist only twice before tying it; so, while the Lady claims her girdle has supernatural powers, this is not only proved to be untrue, but is also the *reason* why Gawain perceives that he has failed the Green Knight's test. Even so, the symbolism of the tying of the girdle as a knot or "sacred cord" (and also the ring, which was her initial offer) is, as van Gennep observes, "common in rites of marriage and enthronement" and serves as a rite of inclusion, even though it is an inclusion based on deceit (1960: 166). But

as a consequence, the "endless knot", Gawain's symbolic reminder of his chivalric values as depicted on his shield, is unravelled. It is necessary for Gawain to refuse the Lady's advances but without offending her. At the same time, he is careful not to abuse his host's hospitality as he "was concerned about his courtesy, lest he should be boorish, and more about his guilt if he were to commit sin and be a traitor to the man who owned that house" (ll. 1173-75).

Consequently, Gawain does not give this to his host at the exchange of winnings at the end of the day, and thus he breaks the rules of the game. But there are three examples of items that exchange hands: Gawain receives the axe as a reward for taking the Green Knight's challenge; Gawain and his host exchange their "winnings", Gawain and the Lady exchange kisses and Gawain receives the green girdle. Van Gennep observes that "to accept a gift is to be bound to the giver" (1960: 29) and, significantly, on each of the three occasions, Gawain receives something that is of material value (weapon, food, clothing), whereas on the two occasions he gives in return, it is an insubstantial kiss.

Gawain's code of chivalry and courtesy demanded that he could not refuse the Lady's offer, nor rebuke her while causing offence. Thus, Gawain is placed in the moral dilemma of offending his host by concealing the girdle, or placing the Lady in jeopardy by revealing her potential for adultery.

The following day, Gawain is led to the Green Chapel.

The final challenge

Gawain leaves the luxury of Castle Hautdesert: this takes him back into the wilderness; however, this wilderness is not a liminal space. It is where the Green Chapel can be found. Where the Green Knight was initially the stranger in the court of Camelot, this has become Gawain's role in the wilderness. Because Gawain is removed from the comfort of the castle for his final confrontation, then the final ritual place outside civilisation "in a well-protected place such as a hill or forest" (1960: 27). The location of the Green chapel is, as Victor Turner would argue, a "time and place of withdrawal from normal modes of social action (…) a period of scrutinization of the central values and axioms of the culture in

which it occurs" (1969: 167). There is a feeling of prohibition about entering this area: the man who guides Gawain to the Green Chapel highlights the vicious reputation of its inhabitant and begs Gawain to "let the man alone and go away some other way" (ll. 2118-9). Van Gennep argues that "the prohibition against entering a given territory is… intrinsically magico-religious" and observes that, while there may be signs to delineate this place, "these signs are not placed along the entire boundary line" (1960: 16-17). Gawain has to cross a stream which "surged… as if it were boiling" (l. 2174) and which flows by the side of the Green Chapel.

The word "chapel" suggests a sacred space within the wilderness, but, it is, in fact, as Angela Carson argues, a burial mound (1963: 598). Gawain describes it as a place where "the devil might well recite his matins … around midnight!" (ll. 2187-8), and later, when he reflects on the nature of the chapel, he says "I feel, in my five senses, that it is the Devil who has imposed this appointment on me to destroy me here" (ll. 2193-4). Rather than it being a sacred space, Carson observes that it is a symbolic location deriving its name "chapel" from the Old French *chapler* – to cut down (1963: 599). This is essentially what will happen to Gawain when he bears his neck for the Green knight. Burial mounds, and other ancient sites, were often used as landmarks to delineate borders. They were more unusual than natural boundaries (1963: 15). Being old, even two thousand years ago, it was understood that such ancient monuments had a spiritual, perhaps even supernatural purpose. Boundaries are where the fabric between this world and the otherworld becomes thinner: the Green Knight has a foot in both worlds.

In this challenge, we see the neophyte (Gawain) attempting to overcome the challenge set by the monstrous (the Green Knight). When considering the neophyte more generally, Victor Turner observes that "monsters are manufactured precisely to teach neophytes to distinguish clearly between the different factors of reality" and, further, that monsters such as the Green Knight "startle neophytes into thinking about persons" (1967: 105). Gawain's time in the wilderness while seeking the Green Chapel gives him occasion to contemplate the future before undertaking the rite of passage, and having completed the ritual process, he will "return to society with more alert faculties perhaps and

enhanced knowledge of how things work, but they have to become once more subject to custom and law" (Turner 1969: 106).

The final test for Gawain, then, is to receive the return blow form the Green Knight. He bears his neck and, on two occasions, the Green Knight feigns a blow, whereas on the third strike, the Green Knight delivers just a tiny nick in the neck. He explains to Gawain, that the test has already taken place. He names himself as Sir Bercilak and that he was Gawain's host all along, and the actual test was when Gawain was being seduced by his host's wife – the Lady was complicit in the testing. The three chances to strike Gawain represented the three days Gawain spent in the castle. On the first two days, Gawain played by the rules of the game, faithfully exchanging the kisses as his "winnings"; however, on the third day, Gawain risked offending the *courtesy* that his host had shown him. While Gawain had broken the rules of the game, the silk girdle was not a love token, but a means for saving his own life, as well as a means of concealing Lady Hautdesert's perceived infidelity. Thus, as there was no malicious intent – and certainly no perfidy on Gawain's behalf – Gawain receives only a symbolic cut, and is told "You are confessed so clean, your offenses acknowledged, and have had penance plainly from the point of my blade. I consider you cleansed of that guilt and purified as completely as if you had never transgressed since you were first born" (ll. 2391-5). The cut, as we have seen earlier, is a rite of separation: although Gawain has passed the test, he refuses the Green Knight's invitation to share the remainder of the New Year celebrations with him, and he returns to Camelot, wearing the girdle as a "sign of my transgression" (l. 2433). He feels that accepting the girdle was a sign of cowardice. On the other hand, the mutual exchange of blood is perceived as a physical union with the divine, and the decapitation of the Green Knight in the first scene, where "the blood spurted from the body, shining on the green" (l. 429), is mirrored by the symbolic nick that Gawain receives: "The blade sank to the flesh through the white skin, so that the bright blood spurted to the ground over his shoulders" (ll. 2313-4). Trumbull argues that as "blood is life" so blood "may be a means of man's inter-union with God". He continues "The shedding of blood, Godward, is not the taking of life, but the giving of life" (1893: 147-8). He also observes that the practice of division or separation in a sacrifice was

to create a threshold: "so as to make a passageway between them, as through a door or gate, and to pour out the blood of the victims on the earth between two portions, so that the offerer, or the one welcomed, might pass over, or step across, that blood, as in a threshold covenant (Trumbull 1896: 186; cf. Gennep 1960: 19, 92).

One way that Gawain deviates from van Gennep's discussion of the rite of passage is that van Gennep suggests that mutilations are "practices meant to attract the female sex" (1960: 71). In *Gawain*, it transpires that Morgana le Fee, Arthur's half-sister and Gawain's own aunt "sent this marvel to deprive you of your senses, in order to distress Guinevere and cause her to die from terror at that man who spoke in supernatural manner with his head in his hand before the high table" (ll. 2459-62). Clearly, this was not considered a method for attraction. Furthermore, while Gawain leaves and becomes more "worthy" in the eyes of his brother knights, there is no suggestion that his sexual prowess has been heightened. Furthermore, the Lady is aware of Gawain's reputation "to make courtly play with (…) charming words" and for ladies "to find solace for themselves and assuage their longings", (ll. 1253-4) so perhaps it was Gawain's *anticipation* of the cutting ritual which was considered attractive.

However, the presence of Morgana may direct us back to the links with the passing of the seasons. McCulloch argues that "The primitive division of the year into three seasons – spring, summer and winter – may have had its effect in triplicating a goddess of fertility with which the course of seasons was connected" (McCulloch 1911: 44). This is also shown in Gawain through the representation of the women: the youthful Guinevere, the experienced Lady, and the "venerable" and respected aged woman. In this case, the seasons are watched over by the divine, represented by the depiction of the Virgin Mary on Gawain's shield.

By completing, and surviving, the Green Knight's test, Gawain goes through a symbolic rite of death, and is then "resurrected" to return to his peers in a form that has passed through the transitional rites. In this way, Gawain reflects the Green Knight's yearly regeneration cycle. This linking of deities with vegetation rites is seen in the folk motifs of Ishtar and Persephone, who pass into the Otherworld each year. Conversely, the death and resurrection motif is seen in the deities such as

Quetzalcoatl, Izanami and Baldr. It is a folk motif that is also linked to King Arthur, the Once and Future King, who will return when Britain most needs him.

Van Gennep sidesteps a discussion of "worlds beyond the grave" but does indicate that it is often perceived to be "a world analogous to ours, but more pleasant, and of a society organised in the same way as it is here. Thus everyone re-enters again the categories of clan, age group, or occupation that he had on earth" (1960: 152). For Gawain, this is indicated by his return to the Knights of the Round Table at Camelot. He explains to King Arthur that the girdle is a "reproof for his faithlessness" and a "token of infidelity" (ll. 2499-500, 2509). However, despite deeming himself unworthy, Arthur commands that *all* knights of the Round Table should wear a green girdle in honour of Gawain's exploits. The Brotherhood of the Round Table is a caste as described by van Gennep, who notes "although one cannot move upward from a lower caste to a higher one, a person can move in the reverse direction. It follows that, in such instances, the rites of incorporation either are simplified or show a pivoting, because it is the lower caste which is honoured, not the new arrivals" (1960: 102). This is the case with Gawain: he feels himself to have failed and to be unworthy, but he strived to be the perfect knight and only failed because he was placed in the impossible position of either offending his host, or offending the Lady. His solution was the best possible outcome for all concerned. Furthermore, when confronting the Green Knight, he was expecting a death sentence, and still came away with his head attached to his shoulders. As a result of this, Gawain may not be perfect, but he is still considered a great knight. As the Green Knight explained to him: "As the pearl in comparison with the white pea is of greater value, so is Gawain, in respect of good faith, beside other fine knights" (ll. 2364-5). Yet, while the other knights look upon the girdle as a symbol of his success, Gawain sees it as a symbol of his failure.

Names

While not specifically included as part of the ritual process, we have already mentioned the symbolism depicted by the Seal of Solomon on

Gawain's shield, which highlights the virtues that govern Gawain's chivalry. For the Green Knight, establishing names are important: he needs to know who it is that he challenges when Gawain takes his challenge. On the other hand, the Lady in the Castle is not named, and the Lord and the aged woman are only identified towards the end of the text. If we follow the tradition that there is power in names then Bercilak reveals his own name once Gawain can no longer use it against him. Furthermore, if a proper name establishes one's identity, we can see the importance of the statements by both the Green Knight and the Lady that "you are not Gawain" (ll. 1239, 2270). The Lady's statement is to ensnare Gawain by his reputation with women. The Green Knight's accusation leads Gawain to bear his neck to meet the blade. The tradition of Solomon's Seal is that the Biblical King Solomon used the seal to entrap demons: having discerned their names, Solomon is able to control them and force them to build the temple. Thus, when Gawain gives his own name to the Green Knight and the Lady, he places his life in peril. Conversely, when the Green Knight names himself as Sir Bercilak, we see that he is exploiting the use of power and shows Gawain's defeat. That said, Morgana's intended victim was Arthur, and she has not anticipated Gawain taking the challenge. The old woman's name, Morgana, is of course also only revealed the final paragraphs. The Lady remains nameless throughout. Van Gennep notes that naming is an incorporation rite which is often lined to baptism and purification and is an initiation rite. Throughout the text, Gawain is told that his name cannot live up to his reputation (1960: 63-4). This is the message of the text: that arrogance and belief in perfection can only lead to failure and disappointment, but, ironically, it is this failure that leads to Gawain being accepted and honoured by his brethren at the Round Table.

Conclusion

This chapter has considered the fourteenth century romance, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in the context of Arnold van Gennep's *Rites of Passages*. I have demonstrated that there are significant areas where van Gennep's discussion can be applied to *Gawain* concerning the rites of transition. Throughout the text, there are examples of separation and

inclusion rituals, vegetation rites, and exchanges, as well as echoes of Pagan culture including baptism (or crossing of water), manifestations of the triple-goddess and symbolic triple death. Gawain is subjected to tests of physical endurance, emotional restraint and courage.

Gawain's rite of transition is most particularly seen in the pre-liminal tests (separation from Camelot), the liminal process demonstrated by Gawain's purgatorial journey through the wilderness and the testing as he evades the Lady's seductions in the castle, as well as the courage of submitting to the Green Knight's blade. The final stage is the postliminary acceptance at Camelot. Here, Gawain has lost his status as the "perfect knight"; thus he apparently moves down in terms of caste, but his experiences make him "worthy" in the eyes of King Arthur's court.

Bibliography

Andrew and Waldron 2007: Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron (eds.), *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*. 5th ed. Exeter: University of Exeter Press: 207-300.

Brewer and Gibson 1997: Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson, *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*. Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer.

Burrow 2001: J.A. Burrow, *The Gawain-Poet*. Tavistock: Northcote House,.

Carson 1963: Angela Carson, *The Green Chapel: Its Meaning and its Function*, in "Studies in Philology", 60(4): 598-605.

Crawley 1902: Ernest A. Crawley, *The Mystic Rose: A study of Primitive Marriage.* London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd.

Davenport 1978: W.A. Davenport, *The Art of the Gawain-Poet.* London: The Athlone Press.

Davidson 1988: H.R. Ellis Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe.* New York: Syracuse University Press.

Fowler 1899: W. Warde Fowler, *The Roman Festivals of the Period of the Republic*. London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd.

Frazer 1911: James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. Vol. 2: *The Golden Bough: The Magic Art and the Evolution of Kings*. London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd. and 3rd ed. Part III. Vol. 4: *The Dying God*. London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd.

Hahn 1995: Thomas Hahn (ed.), *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales.* Kalamazoo, Michigan, TEAMS.

MacCulloch 1911: J.A. MacCulloch, *The Religion of the Ancient Celts*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.

Patch 1950: Howard Rollin Patch, *The Other World According to Descriptions in Medieval Literature*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Putter 1996: Ad. Putter, *An Introduction to the Gawain-Poet*. London: Longman.

Spearing 2010: A.C. Spearing, *The Gawain-Poet: A Critical Study*. New ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Trumbull 1893: H. Clay Trumbull, *The Blood Covenant: A Primitive Rite and its Bearings on Scripture*. Philadelphia: John D. Wattles.

Trumbull 1896: H. Clay Trumbull, *The Threshold Covenant or The Beginning of Religious Rites*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

Turner 1967: Victor W. Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.

Turner 1969: Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Van Gennep 1960: Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*. Trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Warren 1881: F.E. Warren, *Liturgy and Ritual of the Celtic Church*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

SIR GAWAIN AND THE RITUAL PROCESS
Abstract

In the Middle English Romance, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Sir Gawain is offered a challenge to strike his opponent, the Green Knight, and then to receive a return blow a year later. The challenge and the consequences of Gawain's actions, when considered through the lens of Arnold van Gennep's *Rites of Passage* (as well as some of the sources that informed van Gennep's study), highlight aspects of the ritual process. These elements include a magico-religious fraternity, receiving of (and being received as) a stranger in a new environment, vegetation rites, covenant pledges and separation and inclusion rituals. The text of *Gawain* demonstrates that he undertakes a form of pre-liminal testing in hostile terrains, while the Green Knight's second test represents liminal testing and transition, and Gawain returns to Camelot for a postliminary rite of incorporation.

Keywords: Gawain, Green Knight, separation and inclusion ritual, vegetation rites, covenant pledges.

SIR JOHN ȘI PROCESUL RITUAL
Rezumat

În romanul cavaleresc englez medieval *Sir Gawain și Cavalerul Verde*, protagonistul este provocat să își atace adversarul, pe Cavalerul Verde, și apoi să primească lovitura de răspuns un an mai târziu. Provocarea și urmările acțiunilor lui Gawain evidențiază aspecte ale procesului ritual dacă sunt privite prin prisma *Riturilor de trecere* ale lui Arnold van Gennep (precum și prin optica surselor bibliografice care au stat la baza studiului lui van Gennep). Aceste elemente cuprind o fraternitate magico-religioasă, primirea unui străin într-un mediu nou și receptarea statutului de străin, legăminte și ritualuri de separație și incluziune. Textul lui *Gawain* demonstrează că nobilul trece printr-o ipostază a încercărilor preliminare pe tărâmuri ostile, în timp ce proba Cavalerului Verde se constituie într-un test liminal și într-o tranziție propriu-zisă, iar Gawain se întoarce la Camelot pentru riturile postliminare de agregare.