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## ***Chivalry in Gawain and the Green Knight***

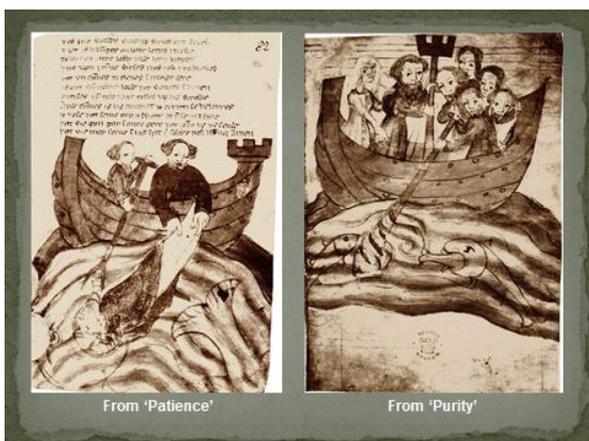
*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is the last of four poems found uniquely in a vellum manuscript catalogued in the British library as Cotton Nero A.x.. It's a small,



unassuming volume measuring seven by five inches consisting of 90 leaves. First catalogued in the library of Henry Saville in Yorkshire, it was later acquired by Robert Cotton, who bequeathed his library to the nation in 1700. The Cotton Library was moved to Essex House in the Strand during the rebuilding of Cotton House. It was later sold

and moved to Ashburnham House in Westminster, where it survived the fire of 1731 which destroyed and damaged other manuscripts (one of those damaged was *Beowulf*), finally it was removed to the British Museum in 1753.

The four poems in the manuscript are assumed to have been written by the same poet (or copied by the same scribe). There are similarities between *Gawain* and the



other poems, which are known as *Pearl*, *Patience* and *Purity* (or *Cleanness*) and are devotional texts. *Patience* tells the story of Jonah and the Whale, and the patience of enduring misfortune and submitting to physical and mental suffering whilst fulfilling God's will. Likewise, *Purity* begins with a discussion of cleanness or *clannesse* and the parallel themes

of *cortaysye* and *trawþe*, illustrated through Biblical exempla.<sup>1</sup> The final poem, *Pearl*, is a dream vision in which the dreamer contemplates the Christian doctrine of grace following the death of his daughter.

<sup>1</sup> The beatitude blessing the pure of heart and the parable of the Wedding Feast from the Gospel of Matthew; the second being the Fall of Lucifer, the fall of Adam and the Flood; the third includes episodes from Genesis: Araham and Sarah; Lot; and the Destruction of Sodom and Gommorah; and finally the stories of Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar's Feast from the Book of *Daniel*.



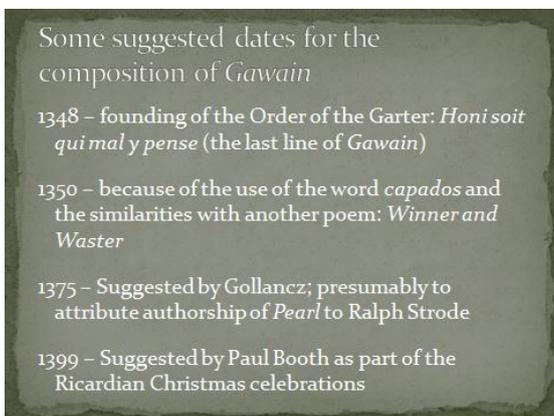
The last story in this manuscript is *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: a secular tale of one of King Arthur's knights, which encapsulates the themes and motifs of the other poems. We can speculate that it was composed around the last half of the fourteenth century. For the context of this poem, it is noteworthy that the poem begins with Christmas celebrations which parallel those of Edward III in Windsor. A contemporary chronicle written by Adam Murimuth describes how on 22 January 1344:

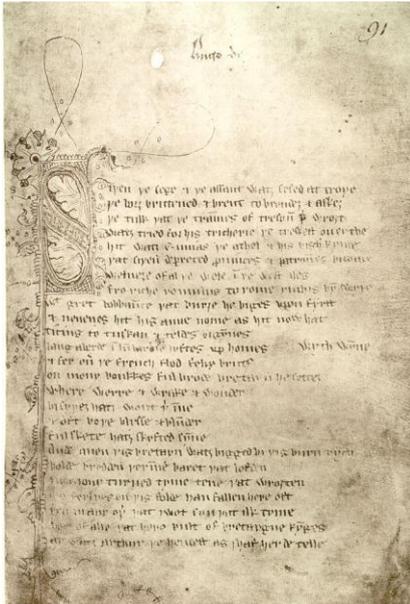
Following a series of jousts of the young gentlemen, the Lord King held a great feast ay which he inaugurated his Round Table, and received the oaths of certain earls, barons and knights, who wished to be of the said Round Table in the same place on the following Pentecost and thereafter...

Edward's plans to re-establish the Round Table were eventually abandoned, but his

concept of a chivalric order was established with the Order of the Garter in 1348, which is another possible date for the composition of the poem, after all the poem ends with the colophon 'honi soit qui mal y pense' which is the motto of the Order. Other possible occasions include the Christmas festivities for Richard II at the end of century. It is tempting to see

parallels with Richard as the 'boy king' and the description of Arthur as 'sumquat childergerd'. This description has been interpreted as being child-like in a good way, the kind of magic one hopes to re-experience on Christmas morning; conversely, it could be interpreted as the kind of childishness denoting inexperience.





The presence of the youthful king suggests Camelot is in its infancy. Yet, the poet gives an ironic nod to readers who know what is going to happen. He describes 'fair Guinevere, without a flaw' and yet, in this male-dominated society, Guinevere is considered a principal player in the fragmenting of the Round Table.

During the mirth and the merriment of the Christmas Celebrations, a Green Knight storms into the castle. This would not have caused consternation to the audience. Knights were often identified by their liveries and so a Green Knight would be as common as a red or black

knight. Thus the poet spends 100 lines explaining why *this* Green Knight is unusual. He is described as 'half-etayn': half the size of a giant, with a thick beard resembling a bush. His hair, skin, clothes, and even his horse, are green, with just a hint of gold. The colour green is ambiguous: while it is associated with nature, life and fertility rituals, it is also associated with the Faerie, and the Devil wore green in Chaucer's *The Friar's Tale*.

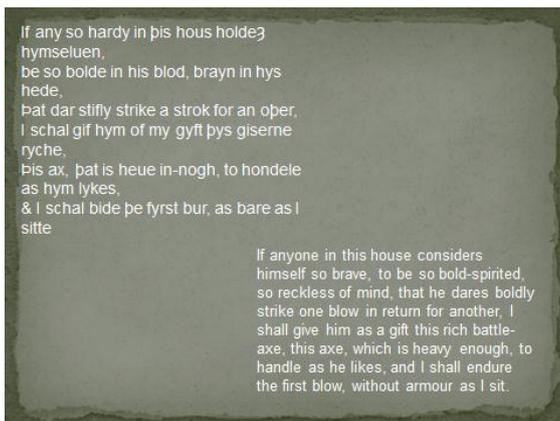


The lengthy description of the Green Knight puts the audience in the position of Arthur's court and their views of him. Opposites fill his description. He is handsome and terrifying, the huge axe he wields is a menacing weapon, but the weapon is not used in combat, and he carries a holly branch, which he tells the court "You may be sure by this branch I bear here

that I go in peace and seek no danger" (ll.265–6). He obeys both the laws of the supernatural (by being green all over and therefore supernatural); however, he is also fashionably dressed and carrying a cruel weapon, and so he is lifelike. His presence is, as Ad Putter describes it, 'the sudden irruption of the supernatural and the irrational into the realm of the ordinary'.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Ad Putter, *Introduction to the Gawain-Poet* (Harlow: Longman, 1996), p. 40.

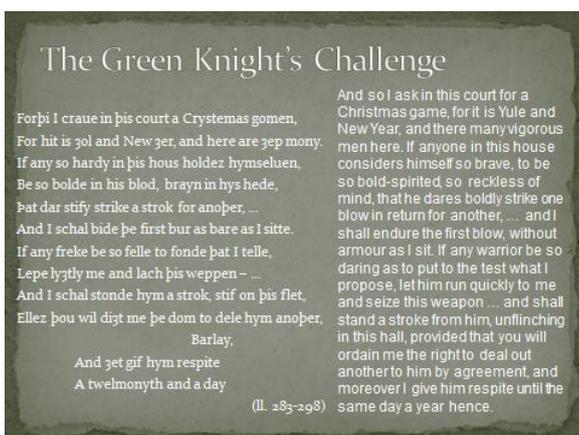
The poet never explains what the Green Knight represents. There are some subtle hints: a butterfly adorns his armour, suggesting some kind of change (l.166). He presents a detailed description of the knight to establish his strangeness. The ambiguity of the character achieves a sense of deferral, beginning with the arrival of the Green Knight, and using vague descriptions saying "It seemed" or "as if". For example, the Court speculates 'Forþi for fantoum and fayryze þe folk þere hit demed' ("it seemed to the people there as if a ghostly illusion and faerie magic",



l.240). One legend associating the colour green with the Faerie is that of the green children of Woolpit, Surrey, believed to have come from a faerie otherworld.

However, the knight is green and not black, and therefore is not represented as evil. Indeed, he declares his intention to 'passe as in pes' (l.266), and, if he wanted combat, he had

armour and bigger weapons at home. Instead he wishes for a 'Crystemas gomen', but, observing the Court's stunned silence at his presence, he claims they are all 'berzlez chylder' (l.280). He then explains the rules of his game. He will receive a blow from the axe ("I schal stonde... a strok,") and then a year and a day later, he will deliver a return blow.



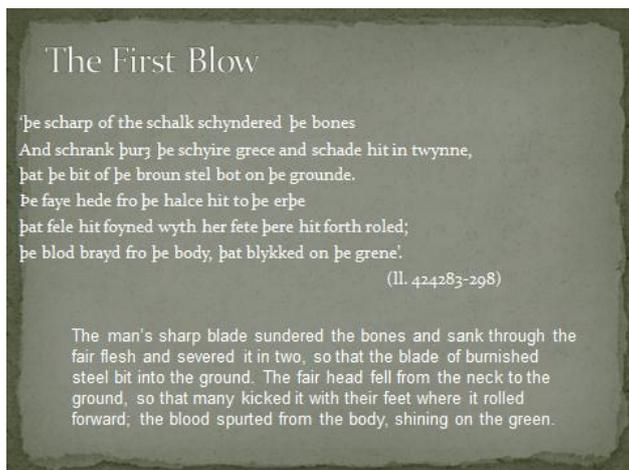
When no one answers (still dumfounded by his presence, let alone his challenge) the Green Knight mocks them again, and now in anger, Arthur responds. However, Gawain cannot let the king potentially dishonour himself in single combat. One might consider this like the king in a game of chess: he is only to be placed in danger if there is no alternative. However, the

use of the word 'chek', for example, is intended to mean 'good luck', although it could allude to a chessgame and placing Gawain 'in check'.

Gawain steps in. In other versions of the Arthurian legends, for example in Mallory, Gawain is presented as a tribal knight and thus he is defending his uncle's dignity. However, he is also synonymous with the character of Gwalchmai in the *Mabinogion* cycle and is consequently too 'tribal' to deal with courtly issues: his character is to act first and suffer the consequences later. Consequently, when he accepts the Green Knight's challenge, the language becomes more like a legal contract rather than a Christmas Game as the Green Knight repeats the rules, and Gawain agrees to abide by them: he swears 'by my seker trawep' ("by my word of honour"), but the Green Knight tells him his pledge 'is innogh in Nwe 3er' (ll.404-5): nothing more is needed. Once he has committed to the pledge, it is irreversible, it binds, 'for better or for worse' – or, as Gawain describes it 'quat-so bifallez after' (l. 382).

Now, the rule of thumb in medieval literature is that if anything seems too good to be true, it probably is. Gawain takes the axe and delivers the 'first stroke'. His

approach is primitive, but effective: there is a graphic description of how 'þe scharp of the schalk schyndered þe bones/ And schrank þur3 þe schyire grece and schade hit in twynne, þat þe bit of þe broun stel bot on þe grounde./ þe faye hede fro þe halce hit to þe erþe/ þat fele hit foyned wyth her fete þere hit forth roled; þe blod brayd fro þe body, þat blykked on þe grene'.



However, Gawain's methods are not as effective as he thinks. The Green Knight's body does not fall, but instead he picks up the severed head and turns it 'toward þe derrest on þe dece' (the nobles on the dias) and commands Gawain to meet him at the Green Chapel in twelve months' time, before he leaps onto his horse and rides away and the poet describes how "No one there knew what country he arrived at, any more than they knew where he had come from. What then? (ll. 460-2), leaving Arthur and his court to marvel at the strange scene."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Chaucer alludes to a now-lost legend linking Gawain to the supernatural, describing, in *The Squire's Tale* how Gawain appears 'Though he were comen ayeyn out of Fairye' (l.96).

It is not hard to see the parallels between the Green Knight and the folk of the 'old



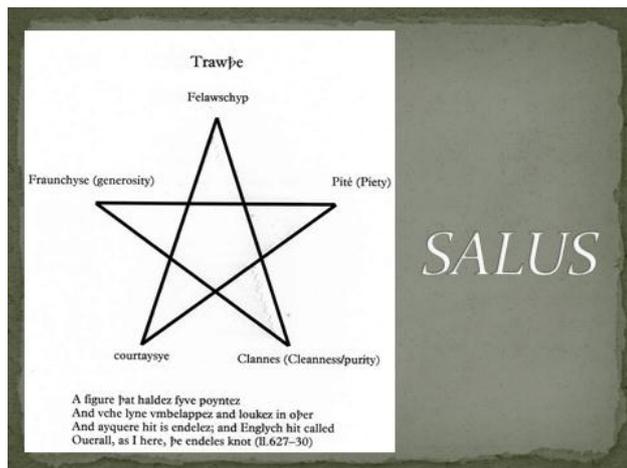
world'. The holly branch the Green Knight carries is a symbol of peace, love and life, and is 'greenest in winter when the woods are bare' (l.207). The stanzas following the Green Knight's decapitation describe the passing seasons, and the flourishing of spring and summer. The clearest parallel is of the Green Man or the May King, whose sacrifice is followed by his resurrection,

just as spring is the regeneration of the seasons.

Eleven months later, on All Saint's Day, Gawain readies himself to search for the Green Chapel. Before the journey there is a lengthy description of his arming scene which is a convention the medieval audience would have anticipated. It is an epic trope, dating from the Babylonian tale of *Gilgamesh*. The armour describes Gawain's character: diamonds on an embroidered strip (l.609) are not a symbol of Gawain's extravagance, but of his virtue. Precious stones were believed to have healing qualities, and diamonds represented the strength of the person who owned them.

The poet uses the descriptions of Gawain's armour to hints at his character and alludes to stories of Gawain's reputation with the ladies. Many tales feature Gawain's "sexual indiscretion", concluding with him marrying or bedding the lady; such tales include *Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle* and *The Weddyng of Gawayne and Dame Ragnell*. In *Gawain and the Green Knight*, the poet underscores these relationships, but his reputation for 'luf-talking' (l.927) is suggested through the symbolism of turtle doves and love birds (l.612), symbols of love; and parrots (l.611), symbols of lechery. Furthermore, 'mony burde' (many women) worked on the adornments for 'seuen wynter' (ll.613-4). Although it was customary for a knight to carry **a** 'lady's favour', it was unusual to carry 'mony'. As we shall see later, Gawain's reputation is well-known and exploited by the characters in the poem.

Historically, a shield like Gawain's was made from wood, leather, a plaster called gesso, and metal. The shield is red. Red gold would be too soft for a shield, and the only metal that would shine red is bronze, although the thinnest sheet of bronze would be extremely heavy. Gawain's shield would typically be constructed from boiled red leather, *cuir bouilli*, over wood with a layer of gesso to form a thin but solid cast. The emblem on the exterior of the shield is a



golden Pentalpha, the 'pentangel nwe' (l.635), which is described over 50 lines as a 'synge þat Salamon set sumquyle' (l.625). Henry Savage observes that, on occasion, the letters *SALUS* meaning health, completeness or salvation could be found at the five points (and the Middle English "Poynt" means "Virtue".)<sup>4</sup>

To Gawain, 'þe endeles knot' (and here the word 'Knot' is used in a heraldic sense) is a symbol of *Trawþe*; however, in order to be 'true', as John Burrow remarks, there are five kinds of excellence – virtues represented by each of the five points of the star. These virtues include the physical: the five senses, the five fingers; the devotional: the five wounds of Christ and the five joys of the Virgin; and finally the 'moral' virtues which are *Fraunchyse* (generosity), *felawschyp*, *Clannes* (purity of heart and soul), *pité* (piety) and *Cortaysye* (chivalric values). On the inside of the shield is an image of Mary, to remind

Gawain of his piety and devotion.<sup>5</sup>

Gawain travels from Camelot, through Logres which, according to Geoffrey of Monmouth is the name of Arthur's Britain and, along with Camelot, is presumably located in Wales. He travels past Anglesay, past 'þe fordez' and 'þe forlondez' –



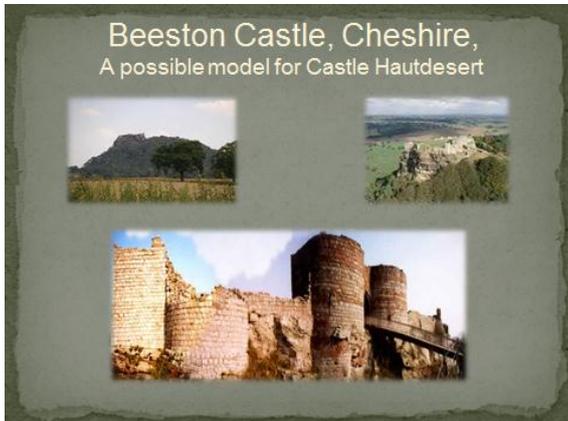
the estuaries and the promontories of the Conwy and the Clwyd, and the use of the

<sup>4</sup> Henry L Savage, *The Gawain-Poet: Studies in his Personality and Background* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1956), p. 159.

<sup>5</sup> J A Burrow, *The Gawain-Poet* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2001), p.46.

definite article with a vague topographical feature suggests the poet assumes that his audience knows what he's talking about. Gawain then fords the Dee at be Holy Hede, which I interpret to be Holywell in Flintshire; then he reaches the 'wyldrenesse of Wyrale'. Michael Bennett observes that the 'itinerary matches the customary route taken by medieval people travelling from the south of England to Cheshire or making the crossing to Ireland.'<sup>6</sup>

However, no one he asks about the Green chapel knows of its location or of a man 'pat watz of suche hwez of grene' (l.706-7). Gawain overcomes many foes on his month-long journey; the poet describes how "If he had not been brave and long-suffering, and if he had not served God, there are many occasions when he would doubtless have been killed," perhaps referring to the way that the mystical sign on his shield wards off the attacks from creatures including wolves, dragons, wildmen, bulls and bears. In fact, the poet complains it would tax his wits to tell of a tenth of Gawain's exploits, but despite all his fearsome encounters, the poet observes, in typical English fashion, that the weather was worse.



Gawain prays to find a place to hear mass on Christmas Day, and, after he genuflects, he immediately sees an impressive castle. While the two incidents may not be connected, the poet suggests the appearance of the castle *might* be a supernatural occurrence; it is described in insubstantial terms 'pared out of papure' (l.802). Even so, the poet stresses it

is not an illusion and describes the castle in substantial terms ('The wall went down in the water wondrously deep' and 'fair pinnacles that joined exactly [to the towers below], and wonderfully tall, with carved finials, skilfully intricate', ll.787,796). So, although the story of Gawain is self-consciously fictitious (the story of a seemingly supernatural knight entering a realm of romance heroes, who can dance around after being decapitated), the author gives detailed descriptions of the locations and the topographies that he sees around him.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Bennett, 'Courtly Literature and North-West England in the Later Middle Ages', *Court and Poet*, ed. G.S. Burgess (Liverpool: University of Liverpool, 1981): 69-78, p. 76.



Gawain hopes he might hear mass for Christmas: in contrast to the bitter winter wilderness, everything about the castle is warm and welcoming. The Lord of the castle invites Gawain to stay for the three days until New Year to rest, revealing that the Green Chapel is but a short distance away. He explains 'my wyf... wyth yow schal sitte and

comfort yow with compayny til I to cort torne (until I return to court, ll.1098-99). The Lord explains he will go hunting in the morning and offers Gawain a challenge known as the Exchange of Winnings. Whatever he, the Lord, hunts, he will give to Gawain, and in return, whatever Gawain 'wins' in the castle, he will give to the Lord. This curious agreement appears to be an expression of the Lord's generosity as it seems unlikely Gawain would find any 'winnings' while lying in bed for most of the day, but Gawain, not learning from the last time he took a challenge, agrees and they drink to seal their agreement. Thus the exchange of winnings appears as a lavish way of occupying the time between the Christmas celebrations and the encounter at the Green Chapel.



Up to this point, the poem fulfils the criteria of the traditional medieval romance poems, except that romances are traditionally set in spring rather than in winter. However, now there are two strands to the narrative, told in different ways. The Lord's hunts are reported with great sincerity, while the section of Gawain in the castle shares elements with the fabliaux tales, which are often comic and even bawdy in nature. The

Lord hunts a deer and the descriptions are filled with the earnestness of courtly values. The text speaks of the noise of the hounds released by the huntsmen, and the blasts of the bugles, the beaters driving the hunted deer out of cover so, frenzied with fear, they are caught in the volley of arrows.. the violent

description of the slaughter of the deer foreshadows Gawain's fate when he arrives at the Green chapel.



Meanwhile, back at the castle, Gawain lies in bed, resting after his journey. I mentioned earlier Gawain's famed reputation with the women; here, where Gawain hears the Lady entering his room, he feigns sleep as she creeps inside and sits on his bed. He appears uncomfortable with this situation, and only shows he is awake when he realises she is not leaving and tries to ascertain what she wants. They are courteous with each other, but Gawain panics like the deer when the Lady makes comments about imprisoning him in his bed; she explains she knows who he is and, while the men are away hunting, she

has fastened the door shut with a strong latch, and the discomfiture comes from the knowledge that Gawain must be naked under the covers.

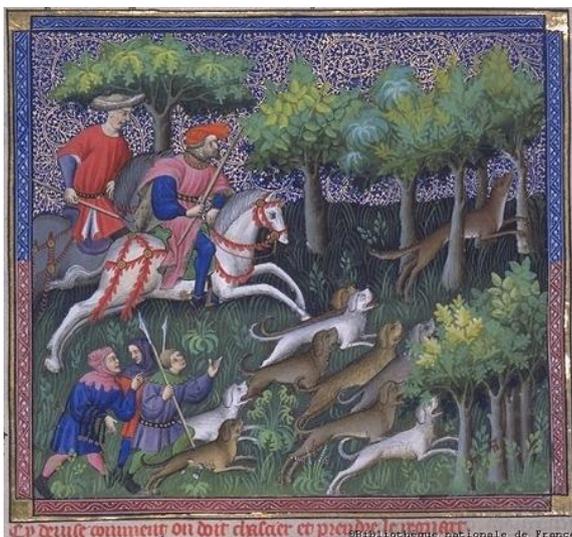
The Lady tells him "ze ar welcum to my cors, Yowre awen won to wale". The first part of it: "You are welcome to my body", seems like an invitation, although apologists for this scene, for example, Waldron, suggests that 'My cors' (my body) is a way of saying 'me' in Middle English and reads the line as "I am pleased to have you here". However, the following line can be translated as "to take for your own pleasure", and leaves the audience in no doubt as to the Lady's intentions. In

addition, she flatters Gawain, explaining "there are many ladies who would rather now have you ... in their grasp, as I have you here - to make courtly play with your charming words, to find solace for themselves and assuage their longings" (ll.1251-54). Elsewhere, the Lady is described as 'wener þan Wenore' (fairer than Guinevere, l.945); Guinevere is identified by her adultery with Lancelot, and thus comparing the Lady to Guinevere seems a shorthand way



of highlighting her potential sexual indiscretion. All through the morning, the Lady behaves as if she loved him a great deal (l.1280), and yet Gawain acts 'guardedly and politely, though she may have been the loveliest lady the knight had ever known' (ll.1281-2). Finally, as she speaks of leaving (and Gawain says "yes" without hesitation!), she observes that someone as famed as Gawain could not have stayed with a lady for so long without craving a 'cosse bi his courtaysye' (l.1300), at this point he concedes to let her kiss him. Now, looking for a reason for Gawain's actions, let us remember he is facing certain death in a few days' time and the Lady's love-talk could well be a way of distracting him from thinking about his challenge.

When the Lord later returns with the spoils of his hunting, he gives them to Gawain as promised, who in turn clasps the Lord's 'fair neck within his arms and kisses him as courteously as he could contrive', thus Gawain gives the Lord what *he* won in the castle. The Lord observes this may be the better prize, and wonders where Gawain received it; however that was not their agreement and Gawain refuses to tell.



On the second day, much of the same happens: the Lord goes hunting for wild boar. Once again, the description of the hunt is graphic and chivalrous, and the boar are formidable foes. Rooney describes the boar hunters as 'a paragon of military prowess... brave, strong, dynamic yet also equipped with the usual courtly graces of the hunter'.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, the Lady continues her advances on Gawain, and her love-talk becomes more

aggressive, culminating in her challenging Gawain: "For Schame! I com hider sengel (on my own) and sitte to lerne at yow suym game (some pleasure from you); do teche me of your wytte (wisdom) whil my lorde is fro hame' (ll.1529-34). She believes that he is not acting in the way that romance heroes should; now there is no ambiguity as to her intentions: "that gracious lady put him to the test and tempted him often, in order to bring him to wrong", (ll.1548-49), but Gawain embodies chivalry, conceding only a kiss, so there is no "impropriety on either side"

<sup>7</sup> Anne Rooney, *Hunting in Middle English Literature* (Woodbridge: the Boydell Press, 1993), p. 77.

(l.1551). When the Lord returns to the castle and gives Gawain the boar he had hunted, Gawain solemnly exchanges it for the kiss he received. That evening, over drinks, Gawain suggests he should travel onto the Green Chapel to arrive in good time, but the Lord dissuades him: the Chapel is only two miles away. He wants to continue the hunting game which he enjoys: 'I haf fraysted þe twys and faythful I fynde þe' ("I have challenged you twice and find you faithful" l.1679)

The following morning, the Lord goes out to hunt. Now, this hunt is intercut with scenes from the bedroom. The hunter and hounds catch the scent of a fox, shouting "thief" after it. At the same time, in the castle, the Lady pushes Gawain to the limits of his chivalric honour, realising he must either accept her love or rudely refuse (l.1772) Now, to a present day reader it seems obvious when feeling uncomfortable in a situation like this, one could observe the Lady is married, so, no matter how attractive he found her, he would not violate that bond (and Gawain *is* concerned about dishonouring the man who has offered him shelter and hospitality). Gawain is bound by his chivalric code of courtesy of not refusing anything a lady asks of him. Indeed, the Lady becomes upset that he doesn't respond to her affections, telling him "You deserve blame if you do not love that person you are lying beside, [who is] wounded in heart more than anybody in the world". Eventually, he manages to persuade her that he is not going to succumb to temptation, and the Lady admits defeat:

'Kysse me now comly, and I schal cach heþen,  
I may bot mourne vpon molde, as may þat much louyes.'  
Sykande ho sweþe doun and semly hym kyssed,  
And sipen ho seueres hym fro, and says as ho stondes,  
'Now, dere, at þis departyng do me þis ese,  
Gif me sumquat of þy gifte, þi gloue if hit were,  
þat I may mynne on þe, mon, my mournyng to lassen.' (ll. 1794-800)

'Now kiss me graciously, and I shall go away; I can do nothing but lament as long as I live, as a woman deeply in love.' Sighing, she bent down and kissed him sweetly, and then she parts from him and says as she stands: 'Now, dear, at this parting, do me this favour: give me something as your gift, your glove for example, so that I may think of you, sir, to lessen my grief.'

Gawain concedes a kiss and believes that he has been able to resist temptation; however, the Lady looks back and, almost as an afterthought, innocently asks if they



can exchange love-tokens, so that they have something to remember each other by. Again, Gawain side-steps her request by observing that, as a travelling knight, he has nothing worthy of her. Nevertheless, the Lady offers him first, a precious ring, then, as he refuses it, she offers him her girdle (a belt fashioned from green silk, adorned with golden

thread). Although it appears to be worthless, except for the love that she imbues in it, she explains it has magic qualities: whoever wears this belt, cannot be cut down by any man under Heaven. So, contemplating his impending fate at the Green Chapel the following day, where he will receive the Green Knight's return blow, Gawain accepts the girdle, not as a love token, but as a means of saving his life. The Lady asks Gawain to conceal it from her Lord. He agrees and she leaves with a kiss.



The Lord returns, despondent that all he has to offer Gawain is worthless fox fur, and in return, Gawain gives him the kisses he received. He does not reveal the silk belt, first, because he would have to give it to the Lord and would therefore not have it to be impervious to the Green Knight's blade; in addition, the Lord would no doubt recognise it as belonging to his wife and see she had adulterous intentions.<sup>8</sup>

The following morning, a squire leads Gawain to the Green Chapel through an inhospitable landscape: 'Wylde wederez of þe worlde wakned þeroute;/ Clowdes kesten kenly þe colde to þe erþe' (ll.2000-1); the area of the Green Chapel is described as 'rough crags with rugged outcrops' and 'a place where the devil might recite his midnight matins'.

<sup>8</sup> In Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*, Guinevere is sentenced to death when her adultery with Lancelot is uncovered.



At this point the Green Knight arrives with a massive battle axe, with a blade four foot wide, to return the blow from the previous year, and ordering Gawain to make no resistance, as he, the Green Knight, offered none a year ago. Gawain promises, telling the Green Knight to limit himself to one stroke. He bears his neck. The

Green Knight 'heaves up his grim weapon, to smite Gawain; with all the strength in his body he lifted it on high... But Gawain glanced sideways when battle-axe came gliding down... and shrank a little with his shoulders'. The Green Knight mocks

Gawain for flinching, but Gawain points out it is a natural reaction: 'if my head falls on the stones, I cannot replace it' (ll.2281-2). The Green Knight tries again, but stops the blade short of Gawain's neck. This time Gawain does not flinch and the Green Knight observes 'now you have all your courage, I am obliged to strike' (l.2297). On the third attempt, all the Green Knight's blade does is to nick Gawain in the neck, at which point Gawain leaps up and declares the trial over: 'I haf a stroke in þis sted withoute stryf hent' (I have taken a stroke in this place without

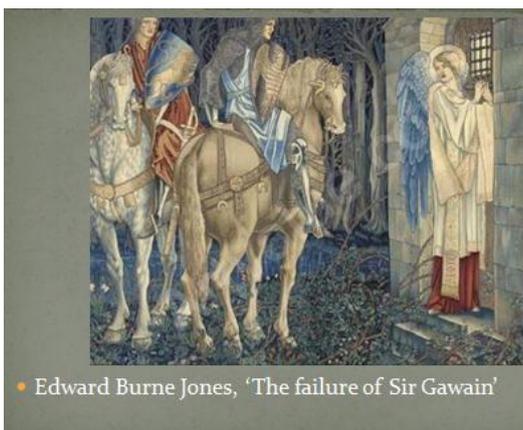


resistance, l.2323).

The Green Knight names himself as Bertilak de Hautdesert and explains what has been going on: Gawain has *already* been tested. In the castle. *He* is the Lord and knows what happened while he was away ("know I wel þy cosses and þy costs also and the wowing of my wyf. I wrozt hit myseluen" [Well I know about your kisses and your actions, and the wooing of **my wife**. I brought it about myself', ll.3260-1]). Each of the three 'blows' to Gawain's neck were representative of his actions in the castle. On the first two days, Gawain dutifully returned the kisses he received. Likewise, when challenged, for the first blow, he was meek, like the deer; on the second, he was courageous like the boar. On the third day, Gawain was a 'pef!', like the fox when he took the silk; however, he did not accept the green belt as a love token, and through his duplicity, he saved the Lady from being revealed as a

potential adulteress. While Gawain was in the castle there were *always* two hunts taking place, one with weapons and one with words. Both hunts were to the death.

For the final challenge, Gawain had to discard his armour. Despite the lengthy descriptions of the adornments on the armour and of the pentalfa on the shield, his symbol of *trawþe* (as well as the depiction of Mary to remind Gawain of his piety) must be symbolically discarded when Gawain faces the Green Knight's blade; likewise, it was not there when he lay naked in bed, and was tempted by the Lady. Furthermore, the one device he trusted, the "magical" green belt is what caused him to "fail" the test: by not revealing it to the Lord, Gawain's deception is uncovered. However, as it was accepted as a means of saving his own life (so he did not needlessly throw his life away, but could instead go on to perform more chivalrous deeds), and so the nick in the neck was for breaking the rules of the Exchange of Winnings game. But then, although Gawain's 'little lie' was one that protected everyone, it was still an unchivalrous deed. Of course, Gawain did not have to accept the girdle, and if he had given it to Bertilak, he would not have had to tell where it came from, just as he did not tell his host who gave him the kisses. In addition, like the girdle, the Green Knight's armour is described as green with a hint of gold. The Green Knight also has a butterfly on his armour, suggesting a metamorphosis has taken place. There have been signposts to the events throughout the poem.



• Edward Burne Jones, 'The failure of Sir Gawain'

Understandably, Gawain is annoyed by the revelation. He accuses himself of cowardice and covetousness, and describes himself as sinful and dishonourable, despite the Knight's assurances that Gawain should consider himself 'the most faultless man that ever lived' (l.2363. The Green Knight offers Gawain the girdle as a noble token of the encounter at the Green Chapel (ll.2398);

instead, Gawain sees it as a reminder of 'sinfulness and the fallibility of the perverse flesh' (l.2435).

As to the reason for the challenge, the Green Knight's explanation is rather disappointing. Gawain is told that one of the women in the Lord's house is 'Morgne þe goddes', Morgana la Fée, who transformed him into the Green Knight to challenge

the pride of the Knights of the Round Table and also to distress Guinevere and 'gart hir to dyze' (scare her to death) 'with glopnyng of þat ilk gome þat gostlych speked with his hede in his honde bifore þe hyze table' (with the shock of the man that spoke in a ghostly manner with his head in his hands at the high table' (ll.2460–2). The hostility of Morgana towards Arthur, her half-brother, was one of the most established facts in romance, so it needed no further explanation. Indeed, now the challenge has been completed, the Green Knight reminds Gawain that Morgane is 'Arpurez half-suster' the daughter of Igerne of Tintagel, and consequently Gawain's own aunt; so, the Lord invites him to 'make myry in my hous'. However, Gawain refuses. He gives the Green Knight a kiss of peace and Gawain returns to Camelot.



Sir Gawain Returns to Court.  
BL MS Cotton Nero A. X, art.3, f.130

Is it really fair? Ray Barron has observed that throughout his time in the castle Gawain is presented 'as an exemplar of knightly courtesy and self-control'. Furthermore, despite the impending doom Gawain faces, the 'dominant mood is one of civilised order and good breeding, with laughter and social badinage between intimates'.<sup>9</sup> However, Derek Brewer observes of Bertilak that 'to trick Gawain into death is not the act of a friend' (581). Gawain's 'failure' is that he is manipulated so that he cannot succeed in the test. However, his moral code is governed by the social virtues represented by the pentalfa which he symbolically discards. The most important of these is *Trawþe*: by concealing the girdle, he has unravelled the endless knot. By not sharing his winnings, he contravenes the code of *fraunchyse* (generosity) and dishonours his host (therefore *felawschyp* and *cortaysye*, the chivalric values) he is no longer pure of heart, and therefore, no longer pious, so he has disregarded the values of *clannes* and *pit e*. Thus, as far as Gawain is concerned, this simple act has violated all the qualities that were so important to him. The pressure of the moment to not offend the Lady and to save his life surpasses the chivalric honesty required by the Exchange of Winnings. Gawain becomes wiser through his ordeal, yet unable to grasp his failure was to

<sup>9</sup> Barron, *Trawthe and Treason*, p. 15, 1.

break the rules of a game imposed upon him, and not all of the rules had been explained to him.

The rationale of the beheading games is never explained; on one level, Gawain's punishment is because he refused to return the green girdle in the Exchange of Winnings Game, and, in fact, the beheading challenges had no significance beyond the performance of a 'parlour game' played in the castle and thus Gawain partially failed the test because he was unaware that he was being tested. On another level, Bertilak's overall plan appears to be to mock and challenge Gawain's chivalry, and elegant love talk. The comparison between Bertilak's hunt, and Gawain's attempts to fend off the amorous attentions of the Lady show great irony and humiliate the knight's chivalric code. Through Gawain's surrendering his 'gains' during the day, he is exposed to ridicule as he delivers the kisses back to Bertilak, an attempt by the Pagan host to ridicule the 'new religion'. The Lady's 'love-gift' holds a private meaning between herself and Gawain. She is not able to entice him to a sexual union therefore she must appeal to the self-preserving nature of his character, 'for care of þy knokke cowardyse me tazt' (l.2379).

Gawain returns to Camelot and wears the girdle as a mark of his shame; however, the court hear this marvellous story and decide they will all wear a green girdle in his honour – thus reminding him of his feelings of guilt.

Gawain's failure is not his attempt to save his life, but that the court did not learn the lesson from him, or see the symbolic value of the girdle. He therefore fails as a moral instructor; indeed Arthur's Court seems to prefer the 'fallen' Gawain to the perfect knight. However, Morgane fails in her aim has of "greue"ing Guinevere (l.2461), and, instead of bringing shame to Camelot, Gawain succeeds in gaining honour and renown for the court and the knightly order, and, perhaps more importantly, he maintains the reputation of their chivalric order. Finally, the girdle fails as a symbol of 'untrauwe' as the court sees it as a symbol of Gawain's valour and the power of any symbol is the meaning that someone imbues it with. Gawain was able to survive Bertilak's test owing to his honour; his dishonour is that he and Arthur's court failed to learn from the test.

**Honi Soit qui mal y pense**