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From Romantic to Mimetic Fiction in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Relatore
Prof. Alessandra Petrina

Laureando
Sibilla Siano
n° matr.1191575 / LMLLA

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Foreword

This dissertation is aimed at analysing the anonymous fourteenth-century alliterating poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in order to outline a possible transition from romantic to mimetic fiction within the poem.

The first chapter illustrates the historical and social framework in which the poem was allegedly composed. Since nothing is known about the author, the patron, the date and place of composition, we can only rely upon textual evidence in order to interpret the poem. It is impossible to determine whether this text was composed in the wake of the alliterative revival characterising Edward III's reign or during the reign of his grandson, Richard II, or even if it was conceived for a provincial audience or conversely related to the royal household. The dialect evidence (assuming it refers to the author and not the scribe) allows the identification of the area of composition with Cheshire or Staffordshire. However, since many lords extensively travelled with their retinue across the country, this identification can hardly be used to discover the owner's identity. An analysis of the illuminations decorating the manuscript might offer further insights into the reception of this poem amongst the contemporary audience.

According to the theory of modes elaborated by Northrop Frye, a distinction between romantic and mimetic fiction can be drawn on the grounds of the relationship between hero and natural environment, as well as of his power of action. Therefore, chapters two and three analyse both these aspects in order to determine whether a transition towards mimetic fiction occurred in this poem.

The second chapter analyses the background of Gawain's adventures, which proves to be shaped on the dichotomy between wilderness and courtly environment. The first functions as an additional character capable of hindering Gawain's path, whereas the second functions as a stronghold of civilization. The existence of opposing worlds is further reinforced by the presence of textual and paratextual thresholds. The ambiguities at the very heart of this poem can already be highlighted in the representation of both the courtly and the natural environment: the wilderness full

of foes proves to be the place in which Gawain is at his best, whereas the courtly environment proves to be but a nest of temptation. The realistic description of a wintry landscape marks a decisive shift towards mimetic fiction, since it weakens the hero's power of action: the hero of standard Arthurian romances cannot be killed by extreme weather conditions, conversely, a real man can.

The third chapter is aimed at analysing the two main characters: Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. The description of their equipment should inform about their identity; on the contrary, it increases the ambiguity imbuing the poem. Gawain is described as a symbol of almost divine perfection, embodied by the pentangle depicted on his shield. Such a description sets very high expectations on Gawain's behaviour. Nonetheless, he proves to be the embodiment of Everyman, thus not exempt from human fallibility. Many scholars have tried to uncover the Green Knight's identity by relying upon the colour symbolism. However, since the poet also chooses to represent him as a courtier, as well as a knight, it is impossible to come to a univocal and definite conclusion about his nature. On the contrary, his greenness opens up several contrasting interpretations that stretch from a devilish creature to the embodiment of the Christian Epiphany.

As the chief source of literary medieval realism is the hero's sinfulness, the last chapter is entirely devoted to the analysis of the three confession scenes presented in the text. The first takes place at Bertilak's castle and is performed before a priest; therefore, it can be considered a representation of the divine court, whereas the last scene is performed before King Arthur and can consequently be considered the representation of the human court. Since the identity of the Green Knight is all but straightforward, the confession scene taking place at the Green Chapel is equally opaque. However, a close analysis of the words used by both Gawain and the Green Knight might uncover further ambiguities at the very heart of the poem.

Since its rediscovery in the nineteenth century, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has fascinated scholars and readers due not only to the ambiguities imbuing the text, but also to its pervading

humanity. Although the poem is still rooted in the romance tradition, its emphasis on human fallibility and real-life constraints might have marked a transition from romantic to mimetic fiction.

1. MS Cotton Nero A.x.: a pearl of breath-taking beauty concealed in an unimpressive shell.

The purpose of this chapter is to analyse some of the outstanding physical characteristics of the manuscript, in order to outline the possible historical framework in which the texts might have been conceived. This analysis might offer additional insights into *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as well as highlight a possible transition from romantic to mimetic fiction, which will be further explored in the following chapters.

The late fourteenth-century manuscript MS Cotton Nero A.x. has always held a fascination for scholars and readers, not only for the stark contrast between its sophisticated content and its unpretentious outward appearance, but also for the mystery involving its authorship and ownership as well as its date of composition. The manuscript is currently held in the British Library and is recorded according to its position in Sir Robert Cotton's library. The seventeenth-century librarian wanted this manuscript to be bound with some works by Justus de Justis and some theological excerpts[1]. It was only in 1964 that the manuscript was restored to its original composition[2]. It is composed of four texts: a dream vision, *Pearl,* two homiletic texts, *Patience* and *Cleanness,* as well as an Arthurian romance, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. It is the only surviving Middle English manuscript entirely consisting of alliterative poetry[3]. In particular, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is written in long alliterating lines evoking the Old English tradition, with additional bob-and-wheel lines, rhyming ABABA, at the end of each "stanza." Furthermore, the Pearl-manuscript – as the manuscript is also referred to – is a *codex unicus,* since there is no other surviving copy of any of the four texts contained in it. This might be considered yet another mystery involving this

[1] British Library, Archives and Manuscripts, *Works of Justus de Justis and Theological Excerpts* [website] http://searcharchives.bl.uk/primo_library/libweb/action/display.do?tabs=detailsTab&ct=display&fn=search&doc=IAMS040-001102619&indx=3&recIds=IAMS040-001102619&recIdxs=2&elementId=2&renderMode=poppedOut&displayMode=full&frbrVersion=&dscnt=0&frbg=&scp.scps=scope%3A%28BL%29&tab=local&dstmp=1571140874598&srt=rank&mode=Basic&&dum=true&vl(freeText0)=MS%20Cotton%20Nero%20A%20X&vid=IAMS_VU2 [accessed on 15/09/2019]

[2] British Library, Digitised Manuscripts, *Cotton MS Nero A X/2* [website] http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Cotton_MS_Nero_A_X/2 [accessed on 15/09/2019]

[3] A.S.G. Edwards, 'The Manuscript: British Library MS Cotton Nero A.X.' in Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson, eds., *A Companion to the Gawain Poet,* Oxford: Blackwell, 1999, p. 197.

manuscript, since the survival of only one copy of these extraordinary texts is in striking contrast with the preservation of the works of any of its most important contemporary authors, such as Chaucer, Gower, and Langland[4]. According to Stanbury, an explanation to this oblivion might be provided by Chaucer's being promoted poet laureate by the subsequent generation of writers[5].

Although some scholars have questioned the idea that the four texts were conceived by the same mind, the leading theory is currently that they were composed by the same author, whose identity remains unknown[6]. This claim is grounded in evidence regarding the dialect features of the four texts as well as many parallelisms between, for instance, *Pearl* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*[7]. Moreover, the author reveals considerable knowledge of "the worlds of chivalry and courtesy"[8] as well as of the major theological issues of the time, such as the theme of confession. Therefore, the author was likely to be a clerk in minor orders under the patronage of a prominent local family[9].

As for the place of composition, Richard Morris – who first studied the manuscript in 1864 – identified the dialect in which the poems are composed as that of the West-Midlands[10]. Subsequent studies have allowed a more specific identification of the dialect as that of South-East Cheshire or North-East Staffordshire[11]. Although an analysis of the dialect features allows us to determine a possible area of composition, there is no agreement on these sophisticated texts ever having been written for such a provincial audience. Some scholars – for instance those who compiled the British Library catalogue[12] – relate this manuscript directly to the royal household of Edward III, due to the motto of the Order of the Garter – "Hony soit qui mal pence" – which is placed at the end of *Sir*

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[4] *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript,* Malcolm Andrew, Ronald Waldron, eds., Exeter: Liverpool University Press, 2007, p. 1.
[5] Sarah Stanbury, 'The Gawain-poet' in Larry Scanlon ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Literature 1100-1500,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p.149.
[6] Andrew, Waldron, p. 5.
[7] Andrew, Waldron, pp. 5-6.
[8] Michael J. Bennett, 'The Historical Background' in Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson eds., *A Companion to the Gawain Poet,* Oxford: Blackwell, 1999, p. 81.
[9] Andrew, Waldron, p. 7.
[10] Andrew, Waldron, p. 2.
[11] Andrew, Waldron, p. 2.
[12] British Library, Digitised Manuscripts, *Cotton MS Nero A X/2* [website] http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Cotton_MS_Nero_A_X/2 [accessed on 15/09/2019]

Gawain and the Green Knight. On the other hand, other scholars relate these poems to the household of John of Gaunt[13]. However, there is no further evidence in the texts that allows us to go as far as that, since the description of the suit of armour as well as the architectural features of Sir Bertilak's castle only allow us to set a range of possible dates of composition that stretches over four decades – from the 1360s to the 1400s. On palaeographical grounds, it might be argued that the four poems were copied around 1400[14]; the script used represents almost a *unicum*, being a mixture of *textura rotunda* and *anglicana cursiva* features[15]. As for the composition of the texts, the range of possible dates cannot apparently be narrowed. What seems to be a matter of mere speculation is in fact a central issue, since the decades in which the poems were allegedly written were characterised by the realms of two different kings, Edward III and Richard II, with two very different ideas of kingship. The reign of the warrior king Edward III was characterised by an Arthurian revival[16]; therefore, it might be considered a possible candidate for the composition of a romance such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. However, it did not undergo the same social and religious turmoil that undermined the reign of his grandson Richard II[17]. It might be argued that such a remote place could hardly have been affected by the affairs of the capital. On the contrary, many nobles of considerable standing such as John of Gaunt travelled extensively throughout the country, between their numerous estates; thus implying that any form of literature produced in their courts would have not only regional roots, but also certain knowledge of the affairs of the capital[18]. Therefore, when discussing whether *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was conceived in the wake of the Arthurian as well as the alliterative revival – which took place in the late fourteenth century[19] – or as an original reflection on human frailty and fallibility, it might be reasonable to try to uncover which mind-set gave birth to such an admirable masterpiece.

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[13] Elizabeth Salter, 'The Alliterative Revival II', *Modern Philology,* 64 (1967), p. 233.
[14] Edwards, p. 198.
[15] British Library, Digitised Manuscripts, *Cotton MS Nero A X/2* [website] http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Cotton_MS_Nero_A_X/2 [accessed on 15/09/2019]
[16] Richard Barber, *Edward III and the Triumph of England,* London: Penguin, 2014, p. 490.
[17] Barber, p. 490.
[18] Salter, p. 233.
[19] David A. Lawton, 'The Unity of Middle English Alliterative Poetry', *Speculum,* 58 (1983), p. 74.

Even though the manuscript is quite small in size (approximately 180 x 155 mm) and far from being a deluxe piece of artwork, it contains 12 illustrations. This is quite unusual for a manuscript in the vernacular in general and remarkably more unusual compared to any other contemporary manuscripts of Middle English romance, such as the Auckinleck MS, or the MS Bodleian 264 containing the Alexander and Dindimus Fragment[20]. According to Hilmo, the pigment used for the writing was discovered to be the same used for the underdrawing: iron gall ink[21]. This might give way to the possibility that the scribe and the illustrator were the same person. Nevertheless, the illustrations were likely added at a later stage and some of the illuminated pages were regularly ruled and bound, thus possibly implying that they were not meant to be illustrated at all[22]. On the contrary, the colourist is unlikely to be the same person[23]. The reason for the illustrations to have been added after the writing is still unknown, since unpretentious manuscripts such as this were not usually illustrated[24]. This change might have taken place due to a change in the ownership of the manuscript or a sudden change in the perception of its value[25]. Since the illustrations prove to have been added at a later stage – probably at the beginning of the fifteenth century[26] – they cannot be used as evidence to set the date of composition of the poems; nonetheless, they allow the identification of the date in which the perception of the manuscript had allegedly changed. According to Wilson, the manuscript might have been related to the Stanley family of Staffordshire and Cheshire, a family that held a considerable interest in vernacular literature and whose emblem was a holly branch[27]. If this identification proves correct, the change in the perception of the manuscript might have occurred when Sir John Stanley was appointed knight of the Order of the

[20] Edwards, p. 210.
[21] Maidie Hilmo, 'Re-Conceptualizing the Poems of the Pearl-Gawain Manuscript in Line and Color', *Manuscript Studies,* 3 (2018), p. 385.
[22] Edwards, p. 218.
[23] Hilmo, p. 384.
[24] Andrew, Waldron, p. 3.
[25] Edwards, p. 218.
[26] Carolyn King Stephens, 'The "Pentangle Hypothesis": A Dating History and Resetting of "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"', *Fifteenth Century Studies,* 31 (2006), p. 177.
[27] Edward Wilson, 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the Stanley Family of Stanley, Storeton, and Hooton', *The Review of English Studies,* 30 (1979), p. 315.

Garter by Henry IV in 1413[28]. This might also explain the addition of the motto of the Order of the Garter at the end of the manuscript. Some scholars such as Breeze and Wilson[29] go so far as to suggest that one member of the Stanley family might have been the Gawain-poet himself[30]. Although there is no agreement on a possible identification of any member of the Stanley family with the Gawain-poet, this might be considered yet another sign of the connection of these texts to the Stanley household.

According to Hilmo, the manuscript is made of inexpensive parchment of lower quality, severely damaged by holes, folds, and tears, thus reinforcing the impression of its unpretentiousness and possible production in a peripheral area of the kingdom, certainly far from the refined French-influenced Southern manuscripts[31]. If on the one hand this hypothesis stands, since the outward appearance of the manuscript has nothing to do with its exquisite Southern counterparts; on the other it seems less convincing when taking into account not only the number of full-page illuminations, but also the refinement of its content, which might reveal an equally sophisticated audience. Furthermore, the description of the luxuriousness of both Arthur's and Bertilak's courts reinforces the conviction that these poems were not conceived for a minor gentry audience, but rather for the household of a lord of considerable standing[32].

According to Scott, illustrations in late medieval manuscripts not only were perceived as embellishments, but also served several different functions: interpretative, didactic, meditative, or emphatic[33]. In the case of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* the illustrations function as a guide to the interpretation of the poem, as they draw the attention of the readers to its central themes: temptation and human fallibility. The illustrations do not depict battles and marvels – certainly

[28] William Arthur Shaw, George Dames Burtchaell, *The Knights of England. A Complete Record from the Earliest Time to the Present Day of the Knights of all the Orders of Chivalry in England, Scotland, and Ireland, and of Knights Bachelors, Incorporating a Complete List of Knights Bachelors Dubbed in Ireland,* London: Sherratt and Hughes, 1906, p.8.
[29] Wilson, p. 315.
[30] Andrew Breeze, 'Sir John Stanley (c. 1350–1414) and the "Gawain"-Poet', *Arthuriana,* 14 (2004), p. 15.
[31] Hilmo, p. 383.
[32] Salter, p. 235.
[33] Kathleen L., Scott, 'Design, Decoration, and Illustration' in *Book Production and Publishing in Britain 1375-1475,* Jeremy Griffiths and Derek Pearsall eds., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 35.

suitable subjects for a knightly audience−but rather Sir Gawain's journey through temptation and his final reconciliation with the Arthurian court. Consequently, the illuminations might well be considered didactic as well as meditative, since they provide the audience with a lesson to learn: human beings should expect to be tested during the journey of life. However proud, courteous, generous, they might be, they will never achieve perfection in this world, since it is an ideal that could only be achieved after death[34]. Therefore, by the end of his adventure, Gawain must have meditated on the difference between humiliation and humility: "Qui autem se exaltaverit, humiliabitur: et qui se humiliaverit, exaltabitur" (Matthew 23:12)[35].

Furthermore, in medieval manuscripts, illustrations were also functional to the division of the texts in units of action, thus essentially providing the text with some sort of table of contents[36]. The number of illuminations contained in the Pearl-manuscript can hardly be considered an accidental choice, as it is also the key number for interpreting the first text of the manuscript, *Pearl.* Furthermore, the central quire being illustrated with Belshazzar's feast might offer an additional key of interpretation. This scene might represent the act of production – the stylus – and of consumption – Daniel's interpreting the writing – of any literary text[37]. Nonetheless, literary texts remain opaque to both writers and readers except those, who, like Daniel, are inspired by God.

The number of illuminations referring to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* perfectly matches the number of fitts outlined by Madden's editorial choice, though they do not correspond to the same unities of action. Although Sir Frederik Madden's division in four fitts is currently much debated, it is still widely accepted[38]. This editorial choice is essentially based on four unities of action, the first, and the last fitts – approximately of the same length – referring to what is called the

[34] Richard Hamilton Green, 'Gawain's Shield and the Quest for Perfection', *English Literary History,* 29 (1962), p. 122.
[35] *Bible Gateway* https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+23&version=VULGATE [accessed on 01/11/2019] "Anyone who raises himself up will be humbled, and anyone who humbles himself will be raised up.", New Jerusalem Bible *Catholic online* https://www.catholic.org/bible/book.php?id=47&bible_chapter=23 [accessed on 01/11/2019]
[36] Scott, p. 31.
[37] Paul F. Reichardt, 'Several Illuminations, Coarsely Executed: the Illustrations of the Pearl Manuscript', *Studies in Iconography,* 18 (1997), pp.125-7.
[38] Edwards, p. 201.

"Beheading Game", the second, and the third referring to what is called the "Exchange of Gifts"[39]. Nonetheless, the manuscript contains nine rubricated large initials that might have had a purpose: they might have been meant to divide the poem into triads[40]. As for the unities of action outlined by the illuminations, the first refers the "Beheading Game" taking place in fitt one, whereas the second refers to the "Exchange of Gifts" taking place in fitt three. The third and the last refer to the final act of the "Beheading Game" and to Gawain's return to Camelot respectively, both taking place in fitt four. The complete absence of any illuminations depicting fitt two can hardly be explained considering the appropriateness of Gawain's deeds at this stage of the story. Had the purpose of the artist been that of depicting marvels, both Gawain's encounters in the wilderness and the miraculous apparition of Bertilak's castle would have been suitable candidates, since they certainly conformed to contemporary fashion. On the contrary, the purpose of the artist seems to have been that of conveying a moral and religious message. To this purpose, the artist gives prominence to the scenes in which Sir Gawain is tested through temptation and eventually learns a lesson in humility.

Moreover, in the Pearl-manuscript in general, the images seem to be linked to one another in order to create some sort of unity[41]. The vegetation growing in the illustrations accompanying *Pearl* is for instance the same as that surrounding the Green Chapel[42], whereas the structure of the upper part of the first illustration referring to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* partially mirrors that depicting Belshazzar's feast described in *Cleanness*[43]. Furthermore, the artist chose the iconography of the hood, a symbol of moral guilt, in order to depict all the culpable characters in the text[44]. In the first illustration of *Pearl* the jeweller-father is depicted as sleeping on the grass with a hood surrounding his head. That same hood denounces the culpable Ninevite in the illumination referred to *Patience*, as well as Sir Gawain himself both when he rides to the Green Chapel and when he returns to Camelot. However, even though sometimes the artist might have been inaccurate in

[39] Martin Stevens, 'Laughter and Game in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight', *Speculum,* 47 (1972), p. 71.
[40] Edwards, p. 202.
[41] Hilmo, p. 393.
[42] Hilmo, p. 393.
[43] Hilmo, p. 407.
[44] Reichardt, p. 134.

representing some details, the tenor of the texts is always unaltered. Such inaccuracies might be explained supposing that the illustrator had followed some guidelines provided by the owner[45]. Nonetheless, such a close relationship between the text and the illustrations is quite uncommon in contemporary manuscripts, especially considering those written in the vernacular[46].

1.1 The relationship between the illustrations and the text in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

In the first illustration of *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight* (fig. 1) the artist tries to combine two scenes from the beginning of fitt one, when the Green Knight enters Arthur's court uninvited. At the top of the page, we probably witness the moment in which Gawain takes over Arthur's place in the Green Knight's challenge, whereas at the bottom the artist depicts the outcome of the "Beheading Game." The Green Knight is represented as mounting a green steed in green clothes, whereas his face and hands are not disturbingly green. On the contrary, the poet devotes some 90 lines to the description of the intruder and he leaves no doubt: the Green Knight is all "enker grene" (l. 150). However inaccurate the illustration might seem, it admirably depicts the shock the court must have experienced at the sight of such an uncanny performance. The stark contrast between the crimson blood of the beheaded Green Knight and his marvellous and luxurious green outfit is incredibly depicted both in the illumination and in the text.

> Gauan gripped to his ax and gederes hit on hyȝt;
> Þe kay fot on þe folde he before sette,
> Let hit doun lyȝtly lyȝt on þe naked,
> Þat þe scharp of þe schalk schyndered þe bones
> And schrank þurȝ þe schyire grece and schade hit in twynne,
> Þat þe bit of þe broun stel bot on þe grounde.
> Þe fayre 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.[47] (ll. 421-9)

[45] Edwards, p. 213.
[46] Edwards, p. 210.
[47] *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript,* edited by Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, Exeter: Liverpool University Press, 2007 (This is the edition I use throughout).

The combination of the visual image and the sounds produced by the alliterating lines admirably recreates the scene with astonishing realism. The alliterating /ʃ/ sound of line 424 marvellously conveys the idea of sharp steel slashing the Green Knight's naked neck. This is further reinforced by the same sound repeated with almost the same strength in the following line. In addition, the sound of the stream of blood spurting from the beheaded neck is appallingly recreated by the alliterating /b/ sound of line 429, alongside the visual description of the contrast between the flowing blood and the emerald green of the knight's outfit. The artist's insistence on the macabre details of the beheading process seems to have been quite conventional in the late Middle Ages. There are similar representations both in the iconography of the martyrdom of Saint Denis – who was beheaded with an axe as well[48] – and in the account of Saint Winifred's death. The story of Saint Denis was certainly known in medieval England, as it was mentioned in a sermon in the vernacular concerning the martyrdom of Saint Thomas Becket[49], whereas the worship of Saint Winifred was remarkably widespread in late medieval England and directly connected to the royal household[50].

The second illustration depicts the first temptation scene with Lady Bertilak's trespassing on Gawain's bedchamber (fig. 2). If on the one hand her outward appearance is quite similar to that of any other noble lady of the Arthurian romances, on the other, she is substantially different, since, in this scene, she clearly has the entire agency. Gawain is essentially at her mercy. He is lying in bed, trying to play for time by pretending to be asleep. A Gawain quite different from the womaniser depicted in several late fourteenth century romances[51]: in Lady Bertilak's eyes he is definitely not the "Gawan hit gotz in mynde" (l. 1293).

[48] David N., Beauregard, 'Moral Theology in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: the Pentangle, the Green Knight, and the Perfection of Virtue', *Renascence,* 65 (2013), p. 155.
[49] Beauregard, p. 155.
[50] There are many references to pilgrimages of both Richard II and Henry V at the well of Holywell, where the Saint is believed to have been decapitated. Adam of Usk, *Chronicon Adae de Usk, A.D. 1377-1421,* edited and translated by Sir Edward Maunde Thompson*,* London: Henry Frowde, 1904, pp. 312-3.
[51] Albert B. Friedman, 'Morgan le Fay in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight', *Speculum,* 35 (1960), p. 265.

Hit watz þe ladi, loflyest to beholde,
Þat droȝ þe dor after hir ful dernly and stylle
And boȝed towarde þe bed; and þe burne schamed
And layde hym doun lystyly and let as he slepte.
And ho stepped stilly and stel to his bedde,
Kest vp þe cortyn and creped withinne
And set hir ful softly on þe bed-syde
And lenged þere selly longe to loke quen he wakened. (ll. 1187-94)

Once again, the illustration is not faithful to the account given by the poet, since the lady should not be standing beside Gawain's bed, but rather sitting or even lying at his side. However, the image is powerfully capable of evoking the idea of the helplessness of Gawain's situation and his being at Lady Bertilak's mercy. Furthermore, according to Hilmo, the red and green dots scattered on her dress would be a sign of moral uncleanness[52]. On the other hand, Hilmo emphasises the portrait of Lady Bertilak as that of a young seductress, with some features clearly reminding of Morgan Le Fay[53] − as for instance an identical headdress entirely decorated with pearls. Consequently, we are under the impression that the artist held Morgan Le Fay responsible for Lady Bertilak's attempt to seduce Gawain. Therefore, the artist offers a key of interpretation that might be substantially different from that provided by the author. If on the one hand the poet portrays Morgan Le Fay as a crone – her outward appearance implying an equally wrecked soul – on the other, by no means does he explicitly state that Lady Bertilak's behaviour was prompted by Morgan herself. Furthermore, one might argue that Morgan's plans do not prove to be entirely wicked[54]. According to Sir Bertilak's explanation, the chain of events was triggered by Morgan's desire to test the loyalty of the Round Table, as well as to scare Guinevere to death. The first reason seems to be neither treasonous nor dangerous, but rather a way to prompt the Knights of the Round Table to meditate on the real significance of the virtues and the values they are standing for. As for the second, it is impossible to determine whether Morgan acted out of jealousy or with greater plans in mind. Had

[52] Hilmo, p. 411.
[53] Hilmo, p. 410.
[54] Morgan Le Fay first appears in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini*, in which she is depicted as a healer and a shape-shifter. However, in the early poems, there is no trace of the malice and the promiscuity she would be associated with in the later romances. In the French verse romances, she is still depicted as a benevolent character, whereas in the *Vulgate Cycle* her reputation starts to decline. Lacy J. Norris, *The New Arthurian Encyclopaedia,* New York: Garland Publishing, 1991, p. 329.

the poet had the French Arthurian romances in mind, he might have referred to Guinevere's adulterous treason that caused the breach in the chain of loyalty of the Round Table. As a consequence, "Morgne þe goddess" (l. 2452) might have taken action in order to save her half-brother's realm. Furthermore, there is no evidence in the text that allows us to infer that Lady Bertilak was prompted by Morgan Le Fay, since her husband clearly states that it was him who sent her to tempt Gawain (ll. 2362-3). However, even though lady Bertilak does not appear to have acted on her own, she proves to be fully aware of her skills in the game of love. Essentially, there is nothing left for Gawain to teach her, since she clearly demonstrates that she possesses all the skills to deal with any possible interaction in a courtly environment.

> Bot to take þe toruayle to myself to trwluf expoun
> And towche þe temez of tyxt and talez of armez
> To yow, þat (I wot wel) weldez more slyȝt
> Of þat art, bi þe half, or a hundreth of seche
> As I am, oþer euer schal in erde þer I leue,
> Hit were a folé felefolde, my fre, by my trawþe. (ll 1540-5)

The trope of the fair lady in distress, waiting for a knight to rescue her, seems to have definitely waned in order to make room for assertive if not dangerous women.

The third illustration depicts Sir Gawain's last journey to the Green Chapel (fig. 3) and conveys the sense of humour imbuing the text. Sir Gawain rides through the forest in full armour, utterly aware that he is meant to meet his death at the Green Chapel. Therefore the towering figure of the Green Knight at the top right of the page seems to be sniggering at the naïve way in which Sir Gawain is facing death: armed to the teeth with spear, shield, and sword. The contrast is even more disturbing if one considers that the Christian hero has just abandoned his devotion to the Virgin Mary in favour of a pagan talisman: Lady Bertilak's girdle. Gawain is essentially prepared to face his death equipped with only terrestrial weapons as to imply that his faith in God has deserted him.

> Þenne he boȝez to þe berȝe, aboute hit he walkez,
> Debatande with hymself quat hit be myȝt.
> Hit hade a hole on þe ende and on ayþer syde,
> And ouergrowen with gresse in glodes aywhere, (ll. 2178-81)

Furthermore, the Green Chapel proves to be in no way similar to a Christian place of worship, but rather an appalling mound depicted by the artist as a black hole, some sort of combination between

the terrifying mouth of hell and the den of some wild beast. It seems yet another threshold to another world, in which the boundary between good and evil appears to be disturbingly blurred.

The last illustration depicts a penitent Gawain returning to the court of Camelot (fig. 4). According to Hilmo, "the earthly court is representative of the heavenly one"[55] and thus, since Gawain has been restored to the court of Camelot, this implies that he has been restored to the court of God as well. However, the image remains someway puzzling, since we are under the impression that there are two Gawains in the same scene: one kneeling before the king in his full armour and the other, wielding a sword, right at Guinevere's side. It might be impossible to determine the exact meaning of such an image; however, one might argue that since the audience has followed Gawain right from the beginning of his journey, they are likely to have become one with him. Therefore, one of the Gawain-figures in the illustration might represent each and every reader, who reacts according to their take on the story either by rejoicing for the pardon granted by the court or by feeling ashamed for the retention of the girdle. Moreover, the arch might also represent the gate of heaven and its decorative motifs might evoke those of the gate of the New Jerusalem in *Pearl*[56].

> And þe blykkande belt he bere þeraboute,
> Abelef, as a bauderyk, bounden bi his syde,
> Loken vnder his lyfte arme, þe lace, with a knot,
> In tokenyng he watz tane in tech of a faute.
> And þus he commes to þe court, knyȝt al in sounde.
> Þer wakned wele in þat wone when wyst þe grete
> Þat gode Gawayn watz commen; gayn hit hym þoȝt. (ll. 2485-91)

Gawain has returned to Camelot *sounde,* which according to the *Middle English Dictionary* might be translated, when referred to someone's honour, with "unimpaired"[57]. Therefore, in the eyes of Arthur's court, Gawain might have returned a proper knight with his honour untarnished exactly as it was at the beginning of the story. This might be yet another reason for the artist to depict another Gawain-figure exactly identical to that depicted in the first illumination.

[55] Hilmo, p. 395.
[56] Hilmo, p. 395.
[57] *Middle English Dictionary* [website] https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED41810/track?counter=4&search_id=1590606 [accessed on 08/10/2019]

1.2 From *romantic* to *mimetic* fiction[58]

The poems of the Pearl-manuscript seem to provide us with the same lesson to learn: the difficulties one might undergo during the journey of life can pave the way for despair.

However hard a father might try to find an explanation for the loss of his two-year-old daughter – and try hard he did – he cannot be appeased. He can only partially be comforted by seeing her in heaven. What is clear to him by the end of his dream vision is that he is no saint, rather a human being and thus excluded from entering the walls of the New Jerusalem and reaching his daughter. Jonah in *Patience* and the characters mentioned in *Cleanness* are all characterised by a rebellious attempt to understand God's design for them and only those who surrender comprehension and put themselves into the hands of God can finally achieve peace. Gawain thought he epitomised the very essence of the heroes of the Round Table, but everything left of that glorious fellowship appears to be a fading memory, a groundless desire to recreate in the mind of the aristocracy a world that had waned long ago. Once the threshold that marks the boundary between romance and the real world is crossed, the only thing left might be the knight of the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, purposeless and dishonoured, a diminished copy of his brave ancestors.

We will possibly never be able to determine the exact date of composition, or the name of the author, or even his patron, but what is certain is that the sense of humanity imbuing the text allows every reader of any time to sympathise with Gawain. Although this poem is undoubtedly a product of late medieval culture, Gawain's humanity allows it to transcend the boundaries of its times and make us all empathise with our hero, our identity being blurred with his. This might be what Frye meant with mimetic fiction. According to Frye's division, literary modes are determined by the hero's power of action[59]. The hero of romances would be characterised by his superiority not only to other men, but also to the environment in which his adventures take place. In the romance

[58] W.R.J. Barron, 'Arthurian Romance' in Corinne Saunders, ed., *A Companion to Romance from Classical to Contemporary,* Oxford: Blackwell, 2004, p. 67.
[59] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism Four Essays by Northrop Frye*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973, p. 33.

environment, the laws of nature can temporarily be suspended, since they are strictly functional to the story[60]. The hero of high mimetic mode would be superior neither to other men nor to the environment and yet he would be a leader. Therefore, he would be the main character of epic and tragedy[61]. As for the low mimetic mode, the hero would be one of us, a mere man[62]. However, Frye's classification of high and low mimetic mode does not involve any judgement on the hero's value; it only refers to the type of fiction[63]. According to this division, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* could hardly be classified as mere romance. On the contrary, the hero's journey throughout his self-discovery seems to be characterised by a transition from a romantic to a mimetic mode: at the beginning of the poem, the hero is expected to live up to the expectations set by the pentangle, whereas at the end he painfully discovers to be a mere man. Nonetheless, the frame of the hero's journey is sketched with brushstrokes of romance and realism that create a unique representation of the natural world.

[60] Frye, p. 33.
[61] Frye, p. 34.
[62] Frye, p. 34.
[63] Frye, p. 34.

2. Thresholds of ambiguity: real natural landscapes and fairy paper castles

In his seminal work, *Seuils,* Gérard Genette defines paratexs as thresholds to another dimension, which is contained in the book itself[64]. Although *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is not a manuscript on its own, but rather the last poem of a larger manuscript containing three other texts probably from the same author, it is provided with a paratex on its own. The beginning of the poem is customarily marked by a rubricated large initial, "S", which allows the audience to step inside the mythical war of Troy. However, after a few lines, the author seems to be willing to clarify the nature of his creation: on the one hand, it will be a standard romance characterised by alternating wars, vengeances, and marvels – "werre and wrake and wonder" (l. 16), on the other, it will be pervaded by a sense of human fallibility – "blysse and blunder" (l. 18).

Apart from the paratextual threshold already described, the text is characterised by narrative thresholds dividing different worlds, which the hero is expected to cross in order to discover his own identity. The first threshold Gawain encounters is the gate of Arthur's castle, separating the civilised world represented by his court from the chaotic wilderness. This step towards the unknown appears to be the first test Gawain's faith should endure in order to fulfil his agreement with the Green Knight. In Gawain's eyes, the wilderness represents the realm of marvels, where the supernatural dwells unchallenged. In true despair, while wandering the wilderness, Gawain crosses himself thrice and, as soon as he asks for God's help, a comforting castle literally materialises before his eyes. This apparition is marked by yet another paratextual threshold represented by the large rubricated initial "N" of line 763 (f. 105r), which opens the long description of Bertilak's castle. This description is so detailed that some scholars have tried to identify it with a real castle, namely Beeston castle in Cheshire[65]. However, if on the one hand the castle's architectural features are minutely described, as if the Gawain-author wanted to provide evidence of its real existence, on

[64] Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation (Seuiles)*, translated by Jane E. Lewin, foreword by Richard Macksey, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 2.
[65] Michael Thompson, 'Castles', in Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson eds., *A Companion to the Gawain Poet*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1999, p. 122.

the other, he seems to be immediately willing to clarify its nature, by stressing that it seems made of paper.

Long descriptions of castles' architectural features are almost standard material in Arthurian romances. For instance, a parallel might be drawn between the account provided by the Gawain-author and that provided by Chrétien de Troyes in *Perceval.*

Sor cele roche, an un pandant
Qui vers mer aloit descendant,
Ot un chastel mout riche et fort.
Si con l'eve aloit au regort,
Torna li vaslez a senestre
Et vit les torz del chastel nestre,
Qu'avis li fut qu'eles nessoient
Et que fors del chastel issoient.
En mi le chastel en estant
Ot une tor et fort et grant ;
Une barbacane mout fort
Avoit tornee vers le gort
Qui a la mer se conbatoit,
Et la mers au plié li batoit.
A quatre parties del mur,
Don li quarrel estoient dur,
Avoit quatre basse torneles
Qui mout estoient forz et beles.
Li chastiax fu mout bien seanz
Et bien aeisiez par dedanz. (ll. 1301-20)[66]

The two descriptions are to some extent similar, even though Chrétien de Troyes seems more concerned with the strength of the castle described, a feature that is only marginally stressed by the Gawain-author. Therefore, the "chastel mout riche et fort" of Gornemant de Goort is paralleled by the "comlokest" (l. 767) castle of Sir Bertilak Hautdesert, thus implying a change in the role of castles in the late Middle Ages: they were not perceived as a defence any longer, but rather as comfortable and sumptuous mansions[67]. It is also possible to infer some historical architectural details, such as the absence of the great tower, "une tor et fort et grant", in Bertilak's castle, since it

[66] "Upon the rocks, on a slope // that dropped down to the water, // was built a fine and mighty castle. // Where the river became a bay, // the boy turned to his left // and saw the castle towers appear, // which to him seemed to be born // and spring forth from the castle. // Standing in the middle of the castle // was a high and mighty tower; // there where the waters of the bay // fought with the tide, // the footings of a mighty barbican// were washed by the sea. // At the four corners of the walls, // built of solid square-cut stones, // were four low turrets // which were strong and fair. // The castle was very well situated // and quite comfortable within." Chrétien de Troyes, *The Story of the Grail (Li contes del Graal), or Perceval*, edited by Rupert T. Pickens, translated by William W. Kibler, New York: Garland Library of Middle English Literature, 1990, pp. 64-67.

[67] Thompson, p. 125.

was common in the twelfth century, whereas it was out of fashion in the fourteenth[68]. On the contrary, the function of the barbican, "une barbecane mout fort", seems to have been preserved over the fourteenth century: "a better barbican þat burne blusched vpon neuer" (l. 793). The defensive function of the towerets stressed by Chrétien de Troyes, "quatre basse tornereles […] forz et beles", is completely disregarded by the Gawain-author, who appears to use the description of the towers decorated with pinnacles, "towres […] fayre fylyolez" (l. 795-6), only in order to create the illusion of a fairy-tale castle made of paper.

> So mony pynakle payntet watz poudred ayquere
> Among þe castel carnelez, clambred so þik,
> Þat pared out of papure purely hit semed. (ll. 800-2)

Therefore, the author's narrative strategy, based on ambiguity, appears further reinforced by the description of Sir Bertilak's castle. On the one hand, the castle is described as emerging from the forest, as if it were part of it, on the other, it is a bastion of civilization holding ground against the fury of savage natural elements: "Þe wallez were wel arrayed – // Hit dut no wyndez blaste" (ll. 782-3). The forest and the wintry wind might be considered the embodiment of uncontrolled and hostile nature and represent the obstacles Gawain is expected to overcome, while wandering the wilderness. Furthermore, Bertilak's surname, *Hautdesert,* literally wasteland, seems to echo the castle of the Grail, which was built near the Waste Forest[69]. Therefore, despite the many elements conveying the idea of a real castle, Bertilak's appears to be disturbingly similar to the realm of the Fairy King portrayed in the lay *Sir Orfeo*.

Gawain's entering Bertilak's castle appears to provoke a change not only in the description of the environment, which is no longer natural, but also in his spirit. Although the shadow of imminent death still lingers in his soul, Gawain proves to be comforted by his being reassimilated into civilisation. However, the ambiguity that reverberates throughout the text is fostered by Gawain's ignoring that the castle belongs to the Green Knight. Consequently, the Christian courtly

[68] Thompson, p. 119.
[69] Corinne Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance: Avernus, Broceliande, Arden*, Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1993, p. 151.

environment that Gawain believes to function as a lighthouse in the darkness and thus be the opposite of the forest, full of foes and temptations, proves to be in fact the realm of marvels. Furthermore, according to Williams, the land of fairies is not susceptible to Christian prayers[70]. No wonder, if Gawain's faith proves to be stronger in the forest than in this courtly environment. Furthermore, even though Bertilak's castle appears to be the world of *fées* dominated by the Green Knight as well as by Morgan le Fay, according to Saunders, Gawain, unlike Sir Orfeo, never crossed a limen into another world, but rather only the real drawbridge of the castle[71]. However, one might argue that the author might have wanted to allude to the existence of thresholds, not necessarily related to the separation between the realm of the living and the otherworld.

The abrupt appearance of the Green Knight might be considered a fairy creature's trespass on this world, not dissimilar to that of the Fairy King in *Sir Orfeo*. In *Sir Orfeo,* the thresholds are clearly recognisable as a heritage of Celtic folklore: the liminal space between this world and the other is marked by an "ympe-tre" (l. 70)[72], when Heurodis is firstly kidnapped by the Fairy King and by a "roche" (l. 349), when Orfeo enters the otherworld in order to rescue his wife. Although some elements belonging to Celtic pagan folklore prove to reverberate throughout *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* the thresholds highlighted by the Gawain-poet appear to be the gates that separate the castles from the wilderness. Another aspect related to thresholds is the retention of the hero's identity. In *Sir Orfeo*, the King never entirely renounces his identity, but rather retains his harp as a memento of his previous condition. On the contrary, when Gawain enters Bertilak's castle, he is undressed of his armour and dressed with sumptuous garments, thus renouncing his knightly identity in order to wear that of the courtier. A major difference in the perception of the hero's identity can also be retrieved in the hosting court's response. In *Sir Orfeo*, Orfeo's being a king is of no interest to the Fairy King, whereas, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain's reputation is the target of Lady Bertilak's attacks throughout the temptation scenes.

[70] Tara Williams, 'Fairy Magic, Wonder, and Morality in *Sir Orfeo*', *Philological Quarterly,* 91 (2012), p. 540.
[71] Saunders, p. 154.
[72] J. A. Burrow, Thorlac Turville-Petre, *A Book of Middle English*, Malden: Blackwell, 2005, pp. 114-31.

Magic overwhelmingly enters the poem from the very beginning. Arthur's court identifies the Green Knight with a fairy creature, "fantoum and fayryȝe" (l. 240), well before hearing his threats and witnessing his decapitation. Nonetheless, he retains some features of his human appearance[73]. Moreover, although the identity of the crone is revealed only at the end of the poem, her disturbing presence lingers throughout Gawain's stay at Bertilak's court. The appellative "Le Fay" associated with Morgan sounds like "fairy" and thus immediately clarifies her nature. According to Williams, fairies are either amoral or dispense justice by compensating human failures and facilitating moral education, as in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, where the loathly lady, certainly a fairy creature, comes at the knight's rescue and teaches him a lesson in humility[74]. In *Sir Orfeo*, the realm of the Fairy King provides a moral spectacle, namely the gallery of the people kidnapped by the fairies, capable of triggering an equally moral reaction in *Sir Orfeo*. According to Williams, Orfeo is moved by the macabre spectacle he is witnessing, but he is also prompted to reflect on the Fairy King's sense of justice[75]. The Fairy King, exactly like his terrestrial counterparts, enforces justice through violence. Anyone who does not submit to his moral code should be violently punished. As a consequence, if a connection between magic and chivalric ethics can be established, one might wonder whether a judgement on courtly values might be passed as well. Although the Gawain-poet does not appear to explicit the function of Bertilak's court in these terms, he not only provides Gawain with a lesson in humility, but he also overturns the romantic conventions that want the hero to be tested through magic and to defeat it[76]. On the contrary, Gawain only partially seems to pass the tests he undergoes.

The following chapters will analyse the different settings against which the story unfolds: the natural world and the courtly environment. This analysis is aimed at uncovering whether a change in the perception of the wilderness and the courtly environment might be capable of weakening the

[73] Williams, p. 540.
[74] Williams, p. 540.
[75] Williams, p. 552.
[76] Williams, p. 538.

hero's power of action, by acknowledging the constraints related to a realistic and rather ambiguous description of the background of his adventures.

2.1 The representation of the natural world: from background to enemy

In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* the natural world is not represented as a mere background for the hero's adventures, as in Arthurian romances[77], but rather as an additional character, capable of seriously endangering Gawain's life. However, the role of nature does not appear to be restricted to that of a mere foe, but rather it ranges from that of proper enemy to that of an instrument to strengthen the hero's faith. Even though the forest of romance is crowded with foes, it never represents a physical danger for the hero, but rather a psychological menace, since it might lead him to moral exhaustion and despair. According to Putter, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is characterised by a "civilising impulse"[78] that results in the description of the Christian courtly environment as a lighthouse in the darkness, whereas the wilderness stands as its opposite[79], a monstrous gigantic enemy trying to regain the room lost to civilisation. However, this portrait appears to be increasingly ambiguous, since one might argue that Gawain's faith proves to be stronger in the wilderness than in his own environment, where he accepts the Lady's girdle in order to protect his life: a pagan talisman instead of Christian prayers. Therefore, the author plays on his audience's expectations by intertwining these two contrasting elements – the wilderness and the court – so much so, that he casts a shadow of ambiguity if not of sharp criticism on the Arthurian court[80] as the embodiment of late medieval mores and courtly habits.

[77] Ad Putter, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the French Arthurian Romance,* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995, p. 10.
[78] Putter, p. 10.
[79] Deirdre Kessel-Brown, ' The Emotional Landscape of the Forest in the Medieval Love Lament', *Medium Aevum*, 59 (1990), p.232.
[80] Saunders, p. 148.

In the author's times, the wilderness might already have been considered a relic of the past[81], since in the fourteenth century almost all the wild forests in England either had been destroyed or had become hunting parks for the king and his lords[82]. In particular, in 1376 the Wirral was deforested for security reasons, since it was thought to shelter outlaws and outcasts in general[83]. It was considered a highly dangerous area that could certainly offer poor companionship for a knight. The author seems to be fully aware of the bad reputation the Wirral enjoyed at the time, since as soon as Gawain enters the area, he emphasises the increased degree of danger involved in this new phase of his hero's adventure.

> In þe wyldrenesse of Wyrale. Wonde þer bot lyte
> Þat auþer God oþer gome wyth goud hert louied. (ll. 701-2)

Nonetheless, since the deforestation had been performed quite recently in comparison with the date of composition of the text, the memory of such a perilous place might have been still vivid in the audience's mind. According to Putter, rather than being a real space, the forest was perceived as an imagined space[84], a place of romance as well as a place where a sinister barbaric past inherited from popular folklore was brought back to life. It might be argued that the lines devoted to the description of a romantic forest are quite few in comparison with those devoted to the description of the real forest of the Wirral, as well as to the real wintry weather in that area. Therefore, romantic elements, such as dragons, giants, and *wodwos*, are not completely neglected, but rather intertwined with the real danger posed by flesh-and-blood outlaws and wild beasts. Moreover, Gawain might be considered the product of his courtly environment; his manners, and probably his entire life, only make sense where they can be appreciated[85]. Therefore, while erring, his solitude may not only be physical, but moral as well. The dreadful natural landscape, as well as the hostile weather could be considered mirrors for his sense of loneliness and despair[86]. His only friend is his horse Gringolet,

[81] Laura L. Howes, 'Inglewood Forest in Two Middle English Romances', *Neophilologus,* 97 (2013), p. 185.
[82] Putter, p. 16.
[83] Gillian Rudd, '"The Wilderness of Wirral" in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight', *Arthuriana,* 23 (2013), p. 56.
[84] Putter, p. 45.
[85] Putter, p. 23.
[86] Putter, p. 12.

and his only consolation is his faith in God, and in his design for him[87]. The author appears also to emphasise Gawain's courtly manners and their pointlessness in the wild throughout the tale[88].

> Oft leudlez alone he lengez on nyȝtez
> Þer he fonde noȝt hym byfore þe fare þat he liked;
> Hade he no fere bot his fole bi frythez and dounez,
> Ne no gome bot God bi gate wyth to karp –
> Til þat he neȝed ful neghe into þe Norþe Walez. (ll. 693-7)

From the very beginning of his quest, Gawain is described as *leudlez,* probably implying not only his loneliness, but also the absence of people belonging to his same social group[89], or at least "of like-minded companions"[90]. Therefore, even though he is likely to have met some peasants along his journey, he is depicted as essentially companionless, possibly implying some sort of aristocratic contempt. Consequently, the emphasis on the inappropriateness of the food, as well as the lack of suitable companions could be perceived as the hero's disdainfulness; on the contrary, it might be yet another way to stress Gawain's inadequacy in such an environment.

Although at the beginning of Gawain's quest the author seems to draw on the romance tradition by simply stating that the hero left with no delay, "wyȝtly went hys way" (l. 688), without providing any information about the direction he takes; the Gawain-poet immediately detaches himself from this tradition by reconstructing a quite precise map of Gawain's journey. Arthurian romances generally tend to favour vagueness and provide little or no reference to existing places. For instance, in *Yvain ou le Chevalier au Lion,* Calogrenant's tale of his shameful adventure contains no specific reference of place or time, we are only told that, more than seven years earlier, he was searching for adventures and came upon a road on his right.

> Il m'avint plus a de .vii. anz
> Que je, seus come païsanz,
> Aloie querant aventures,
> Armez de totes armeüres
> Si come chevaliers doit estre;
> Et trovai un chemin a destre,

[87] Putter, p. 24.
[88] The theme of courtly manners will be further explored in chapter 2.2.
[89] According to the *Middle English Dictionary*, the root of the word *leudlez* is *led(e)* which means man, person, but also prince, lord, nobleman. https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-ctionary/dictionary/MED25294/track?counter=1&search_id=2508074 [accessed on 08/12/2019]
[90] Putter, p. 23.

Parmi une forest espesse[91]. (ll. 175-81)

As Auerbach observes, the "chemin a destre" has no meaning if it is used absolutely, it only makes sense when it is used relatively[92], but no point of departure is mentioned in the text. Therefore, the right way, full of hardship and heading toward a dense forest, must have had a moral significance. Furthermore, even though the way discovered by Calogrenant might be considered the "right way" in a Christian sense, and thus the way that allows the hero to elevate himself, the subsequent description of place and time sets an atmosphere of fairy tale[93]. On the contrary, the Gawain-author seems to describe the hardships of Gawain's journey not only as a representation of the journey of any Christian towards redemption, but also as a real dangerous journey, troubled by potentially-deadly wintry weather. Therefore, the imaginary places of romance, such as the forest of Brocéliande, the castle of the Fisher King, or Camelot itself, are replaced by an existing geographic area that the audience could easily recognise not because it was part of their cultural background, but rather because it really existed, and they might have had some first-hand experience of it. However, according to John Burrow, the geography of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* can be considered "realistic" only to the same extent as medieval maps, where reality was blended with imagination[94]. Putter adds that an apparent geographical precision does not change the inherent nature of the wild forest, which remains some sort of fairy land[95]. It might be argued that in the Middle Ages factual and fictional might have not been clearly separated, so much so that different levels of interpretations were usually intermingled[96]. For instance, medieval books of chronicles are characterised by facts blended with moral and religious reflections, as well as with fantastic accounts. Therefore, even though the forest has not become a pure literary construct as in

[91] "It happened more than 7 years ago // that I, alone like a farmer, // was riding along in search of adventures, // fully armed// as a knight should be;// I discovered a path to the right // leading through a thick forest." Chrétien de Troyes, *The Knight with the Lion, or Yvain (Le Chevalier au Lion),* edited and translated by William W. Kibler, New York: Garland Library of Middle English Literature, 1985, pp. 8-9.
[92] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis, The Representation of Reality in Western Literature (Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur),* translated by Willard R. Trask, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953, p. 128.
[93] Auerbach, p. 129-30.
[94] J.A. Burrow, *A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977, p. 177.
[95] Putter, p. 14
[96] Thorlac Turville-Petre, *Reading Middle English Literature,* Oxford: Blackwell, 2006, p. 102.

Chaucer[97], it appears to have changed its primary function. It can still be read in an allegorical key, yet it is real enough to endanger Gawain's life.

Only after crossing the Dee does the wilderness temporarily transform into a proper romance landscape, where geographical accuracy makes room for vagueness[98]. The river thus represents a threshold to the world of romance[99].

> Alle þe iles of Anglesay on lyft half he haldez
> And farez ouer þe fordez by þe forlondez;
> Ouer at þe Holy Hede, til he hade eft bonk
> In þe wyldrenesse of Wyrale. Wonde þer bot lyte
> Þat auþer God oþer gome wyth goud hert louied. (ll. 698-702)

Nevertheless, the Gawain-author also seems to be remarkably interested in his hero's feelings and perception of his condition. Consequently, he sketches wild nature through Gawain's eyes: the deeper his despair, the darker the forest[100].

> Þe knyȝt tok gates straunge
> In mony a bonk vnbene.
> His cher ful oft con change
> Þat chapel er he myȝt sene. (ll. 709-12)

The ways Gawain takes, as well as the regions he crosses are both defined as *straunge* – "gates straunge" (l. 709) and *in* "contrayez straunge" (l. 713). The word *straunge* (or in the alternative spelling *stronge*) is used by the poet throughout the manuscript not only to describe a foreign land, but also with two additional meanings: "unnatural" ("plyt stronge" = unnatural situation; Cleanness, l. 1494), as well as "severe" ("paynes stronge"*;* Cleanness, l. 1227; "in carez ful stronge"; Patience, l. 305). Therefore, when describing the ways Gawain takes, the author might have combined all the meanings associated with the word *straunge / stronge,* in order to shape a natural landscape not only unknown, but also unnatural, harsh, and requiring a high degree of resilience on the hero's side. The description of the reactions of the outlaws Gawain meets in the forest reinforces the idea that the hero is still wandering in a real forest. They are unhelpful and potentially dangerous as any

[97] Saunders, p. 157.
[98] Rudd, p. 53.
[99] Rudd, p. 60.
[100] Putter, p. 24.

other being that is supposed to dwell in a forest; nonetheless, they are not described as supernatural foes, but rather as human beings. The author also adds a comic note in the description of the replies of the forest dwellers: instead of providing Gawain with some directions, they claim that they have never seen anything of such a hue of green.

> And al nykked hym wyth 'Nay!' – þat neuer in her lyue
> Þay seȝe neuer no segge þat watz of suche hwez
> Of grene. (ll. 706-8)

That is genuinely true of people who do not want to cooperate and tersely dismiss the undesired traveller with an unpleasant joke: in a forest, it is highly unlikely that there is no such a hue of green all around. Once again, the alienation Gawain experiences in the wilderness is stressed by the use of the adverb *fremedly*, which similarly to *straunge /stronge* means foreign, remote, and unfamiliar[101].

The opening of the short passage referring to Gawain's romance encounters is marked by a narrative strategy consisting in awakening the audience's expectations by exaggerating the content of what is about to be told, without essentially telling it.

> So mony meruayl bi mount þer þe mon fyndez,
> Hit were to tore for to telle of þe tenþe dole. (ll. 718-9)

In barely ten lines (ll. 715-725) the author dismisses the standard description of supernatural and non-supernatural foes, comically insisting on the fact that Gawain faced so many marvels that it would be impossible to tell the tenth part of them. The description that follows is quite formulaic and draws on both romantic and folkloric sources in which the wood is not just wretched in itself, but also shelters supernatural creatures, wild beasts, and outcasts in general[102].

> Sumwhyle wyth wormeȝ he werreȝ, and with wolues als,
> Sumwhyle wyth wodwos þat woned in þe knarreȝ,
> Boþe wyth bulleȝ and bereȝ and boreȝ oþer-quyle
> And etayneȝ þat hym anelede, of þe heȝe felle.
> Nade he ben duȝty and dryȝe and Dryȝtyn had serued,
> Douteles he hade ben ded and dreped ful ofte. (ll. 720-5)

[101] *Middle English Dictionary* https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED17643/track?counter=1&search_id=2409404 [accessed on 07/12/2019]
[102] Putter, p. 22.

Therefore, in the wood, Gawain meets monstrous mythical animals such as dragons (*wormeȝ*) and giants (*etayneȝ*), which could be expected, as they were standard material of romances – though probably of little interest to the author, since he appears to dismiss the description of these supernatural encounters in only a few lines. This might have surprised the author's audience, since this material usually occupied a prominent place in Arthurian romances. For instance, the author of the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* devotes some 110 lines[103] to the confrontation between King Arthur and the giant of Mont San Michel. The giant's description is enriched with numerous details about his hideous outward appearance, and is aimed at creating a sense of abhorrence in the audience. The King, burning with rage and contempt, fights with all his might in order to triumph over the devilish foe. Moreover, it might be argued that also in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* the Christian hero is confronted by a gigantic figure, the Green Knight himself, except that in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, as in Arthurian romances in general, giants do not retain any human features. Therefore, the audience can easily predict who are the heroes and the villains of the story. On the contrary, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* the limits between substance and outward appearance appear to be blurred[104]. Consequently, the role of the characters appears to be anything but clearly determined. Furthermore, the author mentioning wolves (*wolues*), bulls (*bulleȝ*), bears (*bereȝ*), and wild boars (*boreȝ oþer-quyle*) is also ambiguous, since all these animals were already extinct in the British Isles by the time he wrote[105]. Consequently, the author might have aimed at recreating a romantic landscape sufficiently familiar to his audience, since the fauna he describes are mythical and extinct animals, instead of being realistic. The persisting alliteration using the /w/ sound extraordinarily recreates a sense of gloom and danger, which reinforces the image conveyed by the previously mentioned "meruayl". In addition, the anaphor "Sumwhyle wyth", followed by an

[103] *King Arthur's Death, the Middle English Stanzaic Morte Arthur and Alliterative Morte Arthure*, edited by Larry D. Benson, Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994, lines 1041-51.
[104] This theme will be further explored in chapter 3.3.
[105] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* edited by Helen Cooper, translated by Keith Harrison, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 99 (henceforth Cooper, Harrison).

essentially identical structure, might be aimed at emphasising the disturbing repetitiveness of those encounters.

If on the one hand, when describing the landscape, Gawain's author draws on traditional medieval Arthurian romances where the forest as well as its inhabitants were stereotyped[106], on the other, he significantly detaches himself from this trope by depicting it not only as the background for his hero's adventures, but also as an additional character. The wilderness as well as the wintry weather make Gawain feel their lingering and disturbing presence all along, and, as devilish foes, they continuously hinder his path.

> And þenne he wayted hym aboute, and wylde hit hym þoȝt,
> And seȝe no syngne of resette bisydez nowhere,
> Bot hyȝe bonkkez and brent vpon boþe halue
> And ruȝe knokled knarrez with knorned stonez;
> Þe skwez of þe scowtres skayned hym þoȝt. (ll. 2163-7)

Therefore, the forest is not depicted as the landscape of romance, specifically created to fulfil the requirements of the literary genre, as in Chrétien de Troyes's narratives of questing knights, but rather as a hostile world[107]. For instance, in Chrétien de Troyes' s *Yavain ou Le Chevalier au Lion,* the natural landscape is quickly sketched only in order to raise specific expectations in the audience.

> Mes sire Yvains ne sejorna
> Puis qu'armes fu ne tant ne qant,
> Einçois erra chascun jor tant,
> Par montaignes et par valees
> Et par forez longues et lees,
> Par leus estranges et salvages,
> Si passa mainz felons passages
> Et maint peril et maint destroit,
> Tant qu'il vint au santier estroit
> Plain de ronces et d'oscurtez.
> Et lors fu il asseürez
> Qu'il ne pooit mes esgarer[108]. (ll. 760-71)

[106] Cooper, Harrison, p. 99.
[107] Saunders, p. 149.
[108] "My lord Yvain didn't delay // in the slightest once he was armed, // but rode on each day, over // mountains and across valleys, // through forests deep and wide, // through strange and wild places, // crossing many treacherous passes, // many dangers, and many straits, // until he reached the narrow path, // full of thorn bushes and dark shadows.// Only then was he certain// that he would not lose his way again." Chrétien de Troyes, *The Knight with the Lion, or Yvain (Le Chevalier au Lion),* edited and translated by William W. Kibler, New York: Garland Library of Middle English Literature, 1985, pp. 32-3.

As the romantic mode is adopted, the audience perfectly knows that no enemies could really harm Yvain, since he is the hero of the story and consequently he is destined to succeed. On the contrary, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* the hero is expected not only to face monstrous creatures and fierce beasts, but also an authentic and potentially deadly wintry landscape. Putter argues that the landscape in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is only symbolical[109] and that despite all the geographical details, Gawain remains a questing knight, and thus like all the heroes of courtly romance[110]. However, it might be argued that according to Frye's classification of fiction[111], romantic and mimetic heroes differ on the basis of their power of action. In a romance landscape, the hero's power of action is complete, since the natural world is a mere background for the hero's adventures and thus functional to the story, whereas in mimetic fiction, the hero is a mere man, and thus submitted to the laws of nature. No questing knight would ever have died in a confrontation with supernatural foes, but a mere man can die while wandering across a frosty landscape. Therefore, the more the hero's power of action turns to be reduced, the more his deeds are perceived as heroic, since he does not benefit from any additional magical assistance.

Were it not for Gawain's complete faith in God, he would have died many times; however, "werre wrathed hym not so much þat wynter nas wors" (l. 726). This line appears to function as a threshold between the world of marvels and the real world. The subsequent lines are in fact a description of a real and desolate wintry landscape.

> When þe colde cler water fro þe cloudez schadde
> And fres er hit falle myȝt to þe fale erþe.
> Ner slayn wyth þe slete he sleped in his yrnes
> Mo nyȝtez þen innoghe, in naked rokkez
> Þeras claterande fro þe crest þe colde borne rennez
> And henged heȝe ouer his hede in hard iisseikkles. (ll. 727-32)

[109] Putter, p. 14.
[110] Putter, p. 15.
[111] Frye, p. 33.

The author minutely describes the sleet hindering the hero's journey, so much that the snowflakes mixed with rain are almost recreated before the audience's eyes. Furthermore, the sound of the wailing wind slashing the bare rocks is recreated by the alliterating /h/ sound.

As Saunders observes, the description of the frozen landscape seems to be remarkably more inspired by the Old English alliterative tradition of *The Wanderer* or of *The Seafarer,* rather than by courtly romances[112].

> ond þas stanhleoþu | stormas cnyssað,
> hrið hreosende | hrusan bindeð,
> wintres woma, | þonne won cymeð[113], (The Wanderer, ll. 101-3)

The long alliterating lines of *The Wanderer* similarly evoke the sound of the storm beating the cliffs. In the Old English elegy, the wind holds centre stage, as a harbinger of the upcoming winter. The miserable condition of a solitary wanderer, *anhaga,* pervades these lines and conveys a sense of loss, as well as of nostalgia. It might be argued that even though this is a poem of the beginning, since both Arthur and Gawain are described as still young, the *ubi sunt* theme, typical of the Old English elegies, can still be retrieved. The author keeps us outside his hero's mind; therefore, we do not know for certain what Gawain might have thought when wandering the wilderness; however, his morale allows us to assume that he was longing his previous life. Furthermore, at the beginning of *fitt two*, the poet concludes the passage describing the seasons slipping away with a sentence that sadly laments the transience of earthly life[114]: "and þus ȝirnez þe ȝere in ȝisterdayez mony" (l. 529). This line might be interpreted in the light of the *ubi sunt* motif, pervading the Old English elegies.

The hero excruciatingly makes his way through the blizzard. His morale is sagging. The possibility of being slain by severe weather conditions becomes increasingly real. However, the hero's faith must still have been unshakable at this stage, since, even though the author himself appears to be denied the full knowledge of his hero's reactions, he assumes that Gawain's change in

[112] Saunders, p. 150.
[113] Anne L. Klinck*, The Old English Elegies, A Critical Edition and Genre Study*, Montreal: McGill-Queen 's University Press, 1992, p. 78. "Storms beak on the stone hillside, // the ground bound by driving sleet, // winter's wrath. The wannes cometh" *The Earliest English Poems,* translated and introduced by Michael Alexander, London: Penguin, 1991, p. 51.
[114] Andrew, Waldron, p. 227.

the perception of his condition must have been prompted by his praying the Virgin Mary. Therefore, the following morning, Gawain's riding is described as "meryly" (l. 740), which might be translated as merrily[115], thus possibly describing a substantial change in the hero's perception. Therefore, in Gawain's eyes, the chaotic wilderness is now transformed into the ordered creation of God. Not only is everything growing in the forest mentioned by its name, but the flora described is realistically made of plants that sprout in that area even nowadays: oaks (*okez*), hazels (*hasel*), as well as hawthorns[116] (*haȝþorne*), and moss (*mosse*)[117]. This natural landscape was not only familiar to the audience, but also realistic, and thus a self-standing entity, existing beyond the purpose of the story. Furthermore, the author's emphasising the presence of a marshy terrain by using the hendiadys *misy, myre*, might reveal yet another sign of ambiguity, since mires used to be surrounded by an aura of mystery and abhorrence, reminiscent of popular folklore[118]. However, the birds piteously piping for the cold imply that Gawain's situation has not substantially changed; therefore, the landscape appears to be still "ferly wylde" (l. 741). The adverb *ferly* is also ambiguous, since it means both exceedingly and terribly. In the first case, *ferly* would be referred to a real deep forest; in the second, the forest would still be related to the marvellous[119], and thus *terribilis,* uncanny, and beyond human comprehension. Moreover, the wood, as the devil itself, is capable of tempting Gawain to despair. It might be argued that despair was considered a very serious sin for a Christian, since it implied a loss of faith in God's help. For Gawain this might have been perceived as even more serious since at this stage of the story he still epitomises the very essence of the perfect knight.

[115] Middle English Dictionary [website] https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED27893/track?counter=1&search_id=2409404 [accessed on 08/12/2019]
[116] According to Celtic folklore, the hawthorn marked the place that people might cross in order to enter the otherworld. Rudd, p. 61.
[117] Cheshire Wildforest Trust, https://www.wirralwildlife.org.uk/thornton-wood [accessed on 06/12/2019]
[118] Elizabeth Deering Hanscom, 'The Feeling for Nature in Old English Poetry', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology,* 5 (1905), p. 453.
[119] Ann M. Martinez, 'Bertilak's Green Vision: Land Stewardship in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *Arthuriana,* 26 (2016), p. 117.

The second long description of the wilderness takes place as Gawain leaves Bertilak's castle, in order to complete the last part of his journey. As soon as Bertilak's castle literally materialises before Gawain's eyes at the end of fitt 2, the description of the comforting castle overshadows that of the park surrounding it, which is quickly dismissed with only a few words about its beauty. Since the hunting park surrounding the castle is perceived as a protraction of the castle itself, there might be little if no need to describe it in detail. Furthermore, the surrounding walls function as boundaries[120] capable of separating the civilised tamed nature of the hunting park from the terrifying wilderness (l. 768). When describing the hunting scenes, the author seems exceedingly interested in providing a minute description of the hunting technique[121], which might be quite expected, since Arthurian romances prove to be overcrowded with details of medieval courtly mores[122]. On the contrary, the description of nature appears to be rather neglected in fitt 3. There is only a brief mention of the wild animals' fear at the sound of the hunting horn. As a consequence, it might be argued that fitt 1 and 3 are only marginally focused on the natural landscape, whereas fitt 2 and 4 are conversely more focused on the influence a hostile wintry landscape might exert on the hero. However, the great enemy still seems to be the weather. With impressive realism, the author depicts Gawain still in bed, overhearing the storm raging outside the castle, fully aware that in a few hours he is due to face the blizzard in order to reach the Green Chapel. The alliterations using the /s/ and /w/ sounds vividly recreate the howling of the wind whipping the castle windows. The hero is lying in bed, half-asleep, distressed by both the sound of the storm and by that of the cockcrow, which is urging him to depart and join the voices of the pitiful animals stung by the icy wind.

> Now neȝez þe Nw Ȝere and þe nyȝt passez,
> Þe day dryuez to þe derk, as Dryȝtyn biddez.
> Bot wylde wederez of þe worlde wakned þeroute;
> Clowdes kesten kenly þe colde to þe erþe,
> Wyth nyȝe innoghe of þe norþe þe naked to tene.
> Þe snawe snitered ful snart, þat snayped þe wylde;
> Þe werbelande wynde wapped fro þe hyȝe

[120] Putter, p. 34.
[121] Saunders, p. 152.
[122] Auerbach, p. 136.

And drof vche dale ful of dryftes ful grete.
Þe leude lystened ful wel, þat leȝ in his bedde – (ll. 1998-2006)

The natural word is awaking in order to challenge the hero once more. The verb *wakned* is also used in *Cleanness* (l. 437) to describe the moment in which God awakens the wind in order to blow the clouds away and to put an end to the flood. It is as though God himself were raising a storm in order to test Gawain. However, the weather God awakens is defined as *wylde,* a word that is usually associated with a complete lack of control[123], and thus in stark contrast with God's creation, which is the embodiment of order and control.

swa nu missenlice | geond þisne middangeard
winde biwaune | weallas stondaþ,
hrime bihrorene, | hryðge þa ederas[124] (The Wanderer, ll. 75-7)

Furthermore, even though in *The Wanderer* the image of the storm raging against *ederas* and *weallas* is quite similar to that depicted in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, its purpose seems to be partially different. In the elegy, the stormy weather is a metaphor for decay and the transience of earthly things[125], whereas in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* it appears to be a realistic description of the wintry landscape.

When Gawain crosses the gate that separates Bertilak's castle from the surrounding environment, he enters the mysterious and dangerous kingdom of nature once again. Before the last temptation scene in which Gawain's guide suggests he flees for safety, there is another description of the natural landscape no longer stormy, but completely paralysed by ice.

Þay boȝen bi bonkkez þer boȝez ar bare;
Þay clomben bi clyffez þer clengez þe colde.
Þe heuen watz vphalt, bot vgly þervnder;
Mist muged on þe mor, malt on þe mountez;

[123] *Middle English Dictionary* https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary?utf8=%E2%9C%93&_method=post&authenticity_token=ApEBEqooeC8VaDKQSP62orPUzITY3KWUmxiyIM%2FpxNwXLiAJ8zkgcpaA7cUD7FZdMfnCG8MFr%2B3ZWDycwS2MnQ%3D%3D&redirect=%2Fm%2Fmiddle-english-dictionary%2Fdictionary%2FMED51545&counter=2&search_id=2430860&search_field=hnf&q=wylde [accessed on 06/12/2019]

[124] Anne L. Klinck*, The Old English Elegies, A Critical Edition and Genre Study*, Montreal: McGill-Queen 's University Press, 1992, p.77. "Even as now, in many places, over the earth // walls stand, wind-beaten, //hung with hoar-frost; ruined habitations." *The Earliest English Poems*, translated and introduced by Michael Alexander, London: Penguin, 1991, p. 50.

[125] Christopher Dean, "'Weal Wundrum Heah, Wyrmlicum Fah" and the Narrative Background of "The Wanderer"', *Modern Philology,* 63 (1965), p. 143.

Vch hille hade a hatte, a myst-hakel huge.
Brokez byled and breke bi bonkkez aboute,
Schyre schaterande on schorez, þer þay doun schulden. (ll. 2077- 83)

Once again, the author intertwines realistic elements with elements capable of evoking the supernatural. The description of the mist, which was considered an almost supernatural presence[126], and the threatening clouds convey a sense of stillness that can be interpreted either in a realistic or in a metaphorical sense. As for the first, it genuinely depicts a sense of icy calm engulfing the frosty landscape; as for the latter, it conveys the idea of "the calm before the storm". Gawain has almost reached his final destination and he is now due to face the Green Knight himself in a hostile environment, alone. The description of bubbling streams also seems to have been inspired by the Old English elegies, where it is almost a trope[127].

Nap nihtscua, | norþan sniwde,
hrim hrusan bond, | hægl feol on eorþan,
corna caldast. […][128] (The Seafarer, ll. 31-3)

When Gawain, by crossing a thicket, reaches the bottom of the valley, he appears to be still searching for a proper chapel, such as those he was used to. Therefore, he seems to be disoriented or at least rather surprised at discovering that the valley is uninhabited.

And þenne he wayted hym aboute, and wylde hit hym þoȝt,
And seȝe no syngne of resette bisydez nowhere, (ll. 2163-4)

In the following lines, the author describes the sharp rocks grazing the clouds by means of several repetitions (*Ruȝe, knokled; bonke, brymme; bonkkez; knarrez, stonez*). The alliteration using the /kn/ sound functions as a synaesthesia, since the visual image of the rocks scraping the cloud is transformed into something audible. The natural landscape also conveys the idea of barbaric paganism standing out against Christian progress and civilisation. This confrontation is further reinforced by the use of supernatural forces and imagery inherited from pagan myths.

He seȝ non suche in no syde – and selly hym þoȝt –
Saue a lyttel on a launde, a lawe as hit were

[126] Hanscom, p. 453.
[127] Hanscom, p. 455.
[128] Anne L. Klinck, *The Old English Elegies, A Critical Edition and Genre Study*, Montreal: McGill-Queen 's University Press, 1992, p. 80. "Night thickened, and from the north snowflakes; // hail fell on the frost-bound earth, //coldest of grains." *The Earliest English Poems*, translated and introduced by Michael Alexander, London: Penguin, 1991, p. 53.

A balȝ berȝ bi a bonke þe brymme bysyde,
Bi a forȝ of a flode þat ferked þare;
Þe borne blubred þerinne as hit boyled hade. (ll. 2170-4)

The "barrow" and the nearby "boiling waters" are clearly inherited from both Celtic and Norse mythology, according to which the tumuli were inhabited by hostile and elfish creatures.[129] Furthermore, the author seems to be remarkably interested in the description of water, which is depicted at first as bubbling (*byled*), and then as boiling (*boyled*). The addition of only one vowel sound determines a significant change in the perception of its nature. In the first scene, the stream is bubbling in a very realistic way; in the second, the boiling water seems to evoke the landscape of romance, where its boiling is due to the intervention of the supernatural. For instance, in *Yvain ou le Chevalier au Lion* we can retrieve a similar example of boiling water gushing from a fountain before the enchanted forest of Brocéliande.

De la fontaine pöez croire,
Qu'ele boloit com iaue chaude.
Li perrons ert d'une esmeraude[130] (ll. 422-4)

The very last description of the natural landscape is devoted to the Green Chapel, which proves to be not a Christian place of worship, but rather a mound overgrown with grass, some sort of pagan site. The Green Chapel being described as an "olde caue, or a creuisse of an olde cragge" (ll. 2182-3) might be considered a sign to mark the entrance into the fairy world. The *bob* closing with the word *spelle* might give way to different interpretations. On the one hand *spelle* might be translated with "words"; therefore lines 2183-4 ("he couþe hit noȝt deme with spelle") could mean that Gawain could not say with words whether it was a cave or a crevice. On the other hand, *spelle* could be translated with "geste", "deeds", implying that never in romances has Gawain heard of such a place.

Hit hade a hole on þe ende and on ayþer syde,
And ouergrowen with gresse in glodes aywhere,
And al watz holȝ inwith, nobot an olde caue
Or a creuisse of an olde cragge he couþe hit noȝt deme

[129] Gianna Chiesa Isnardi, *I Miti Nordici,* Milano: Longanesi, 1991, p. 310.
[130] "As for the spring, you can be assured// that it was boiling like hot water. // the stone was of emerald." Chrétien de Troyes, *The Knight with the Lion, or Yvain (Le Chevalier au Lion),* edited and translated by William W. Kibler, New York: Garland Library of Middle English Literature, 1985, pp. 18-9.

With spelle. (ll. 2180-85)

Moreover, the author appears to use the representation of the natural world also to describe the passing of time. In romances, time references are usually quite vague and the rhythm of the story tend to be paced by the events involving the hero. As a consequence, the time of the narration, as well as the natural landscape, seem to be only functional to the story, and thus shaped according to the narrative needs. On the contrary, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* several ideas of time seem to be intertwined. The time of nature is paced by the passing of the seasons, which is described according to the changes engendered in the landscape[131]. This kind of description presents quite conventional elements[132], such as the battle between Summer and Winter[133]. On the other hand, the passing of the year is marked by religious festivities, such as Christmas, Lent, and All Saints' Day. Therefore, elements belonging to popular folklore seems to be intermingled with Christian elements. Time seems to be perceived as the superimposition of different levels, characterised by different inherent characteristics. The time of nature and of Christian devotion appears to be cyclical, and thus mirrors the structure of the poem itself. On the contrary, the timeline of the hero's adventure appears to be unidirectional and heading towards his redemption[134]. Furthermore, from the very beginning of the poem, the author proves to be concerned with the cyclical nature of time.

Where werre and wrake and wonder
Bi syþez hatz wont þerinne
And oft boþe blysse and blunder
Ful skete hatz skyfted synne. (ll. 16-9)

Many scholars have interpreted these lines as some sort of bad omen threatening the destiny of Camelot[135]. However, this might be yet another way to emphasise the cyclical nature of time, which

[131] Kessel-Brown, p. 228.
[132] Putter, p. 11.
[133] Andrew, Waldron, p. 226.
[134] Martinez, p. 116.
[135] Kevin R. West, 'Tokens of Sin, Badges of Honor: Julian of Norwich and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *Renascence*, 69 (2017), p. 4. Richard Hamilton Green, 'Gawain's Shield and the Quest for Perfection', *English Literary History,* 2 (1962), p. 124.

pervades the poem: even wars that usually deserve a prominent place in history books are in fact only accidents that will recurringly occur until the ending of the world.

Unlike the heroes of courtly romances, Gawain's adventure seems to be disturbingly marked by an obsession for the passing of time. Even though the twelve-month deadline can be considered an element of the fairy tales, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the hero appears to be genuinely concerned about the possibility that he will not be able to fulfil his task within the terms agreed. However, on the one hand the preoccupation for the passing of time is related to the concern of breaking his word; on the other, there is also a genuinely human preoccupation for the transience of earthly things. The heroes of courtly romances do not seem to be concerned with the passing of time; after all, their deeds and their names have been made eternal. On the contrary, even in this respect, Gawain seems more of a man, since he can still retrospectively look at his life and wonder how many years he will be allowed to see transformed into many yesterdays.

2.2 Feasting and celebrating at King Arthur's and Sir Bertilak's courts

After raising customary expectations for the *geste* genre in the audience by tracing the lineage of Arthur *þe hendest* (l. 25) back to his mythical ancestor Brutus, the author shifts the focus to King Arthur's court in Camelot. It is Christmas time. Although Christmas celebrations usually stretch over a period of twelve days from Christmas Day until 6 January, Arthur is holding a fifteen-day feast, thus probably emphasising from the very beginning the grandeur of the King's court. As was common in the Middle Ages, King Arthur's celebrations are characterised by tournaments, jousts, and carols.

> Þer tournayed tulkes by tymez ful mony,
> Justed ful jolilé þise gentyle kniȝtes,
> Syþen kayred to þe court, carols to make; (ll. 41-3)

If medieval chronicles are to be believed, royal feasts were incredibly sumptuous, sophisticated and the consumption of food was utterly exaggerated. They were meant not only to promote the host's

wealth and power, but also to reinforce social relationships[136]. Games such as tournaments and jousts were often associated with Christmas, christening, or wedding celebrations and they were also characterised by the presence of music, dancing and disguises[137]. Although winter tournaments were less common in general, both Edward III and Richard II held some. For instance, in 1341 Edward III held two sumptuous tournaments: one at Reading on Christmas Day, the other at Langley on Candlemas.

> ANNO Domini 1341, regni vero sui Angliae quintodecimo, rex celebravit Christi Natale apud Guildeforde, et postea apud Redinge hastiludiavit. Item in festo Purificationis, apud Langeley, puerorum propter honorem nobilium de Gasconia quos ibidem cinxit ad hordinem militarem, habuit solemnia hastiludia[138].

Medieval chronicles allow the outlining of a crucial difference: the word *hastiludium* – literally "game with the spear" – probably referred to jousts or single combats, whereas *torneamentum* – proper tournament – probably referred to mock warfare (mêlée)[139]. Therefore, what is generally called "tournament" proves to be in fact a codified sequence of matches, usually beginning with single combats with lances, and ending with mock warfare in open spaces[140]. Tournaments were associated with all Christian festivals[141], not only in real life, but also in literature. In Chrétien de Troyes's *Erec et Enide,* for instance, a tournament is held at Tenebroc a month after Pentecost as a customary part of the celebrations.

> Un mois aprés Pentecoste
> Li tornoiz assemble et ajoste
> Desoz Danebroc en la plaigne. (ll. 2131-3)[142]

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[136] Derek Brewer, 'Feasts' in Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson eds., *A Companion to the Gawain Poet*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1999, p. 132.
[137] Barber, p. 77.
[138] Galfridi Le Baker De Swinbroke, *Chronicon Angliae Temporibus Edwardi II et Edwardi III*, edited by J. A. Giles, London: Bohn, 1847, p. 149. "In AD 1341, in the fifteenth year of his reign in England, the King celebrated Christmas at Guildford, and afterwards held a tournament at Reading. Also on the feast of the Purification he held a great tournament at Childs Langley in honour of the nobles of Gascony upon whom he had placed the belt of knighthood while he was there." Geoffrey Le Baker, *The Chronicle of Geoffrey Le Baker,* edited by Richard Barber and translated by David Preest, Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2012, p. 64.
[139] Barber, p. 68.
[140] Barber, p. 68.
[141] Brewer, p. 131.
[142] Chrétien de Troyes, *Erec et Enide,* edited and translated by Jean-Marie Fritz, Paris: Librairie générale française, 1992, p. 180. "One month, then, after Pentecost, // they met for tourney and for joust // beneath Tenebroc on the plain." (ll. 2083-5) Chrétien de Troyes, *Erec and Enide* translated by Dorothy Gilbert, Oxford: University of California Press, 1992, p. 104.

The pervasiveness of tournaments might also be related to their twofold nature: they were a way to prove one's courage and knightly virtues, as well as a way to enjoy the pleasure of danger. In this respect, tournaments might be considered a proper game[143]. As such, they were characterised by strict rules aimed at avoiding fatal outcomes, as well as escalations of private feuds[144]. Furthermore, even though knights should show no sign of *couardyse,* they might have felt the same fear of death that is inherent in any other human being. Knight or not, one might wonder why he should wantonly throw his life away[145]. This remark appears to uncover a breach capable of undermining the very essence of the knightly code, not only as described in romances, but also in real life. Romance heroes, admired in late medieval courts, seem to promote a lifestyle consisting in jeopardising one's life only to enhance one's reputation. It is a point made by the Green Knight himself, at the Green Chapel: no sinful covetousness can be discerned in Gawain's behaviour, but rather a genuine love for life.

> Bot here yow lakked a lyttel, sir, and lewté yow wonted;
> Bot þat watz for no wylyde werke, ne wowyng nauþer,
> Bot for ȝe lufed your lyf – þe lasse I yow blame. (ll. 2366-8)

According to Clein, the description of feasts represents the triumph of civilisation over the wilderness[146]. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* this conception might be even more important, given that the contrast between nature and court is at the very heart of the poem. Therefore, feasts and games in late medieval romances, as well as in real late medieval courts, might be considered a way to celebrate how natural instincts, such as eating and fighting, were curbed through a strict system of rules and manners and transformed into the highest form of civilisation, represented by banquets and tournaments. Instincts are thus elevated to the level of a fine art, a way to distinguish

[143] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens (Homo ludens. Proeve eener bepaling van het spel-element der cultuur)*, translated by Corinna von Schendel, Milano: Il Saggiatore, 1983, p. 134.
[144] Huizinga, p. 135.
[145] Derek Pearsall, 'Courtesy and Chivalry in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: the Order of Shame and the Invention of Embarrassment' in Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson eds., *A Companion to the Gawain Poet*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1999, p. 356.
[146] Wendy Clein, *Concepts of Chivalry in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Norman: Pilgrim Books, 1987, p. 20.

the aristocracy from the lower classes[147]. These refined and sophisticated mores make the members of the aristocracy feel part of a special élite, whose lifestyle would mirror their inner qualities[148]. External beauty was believed to be not only the mirror of internal virtue, but also a reason for renown[149]. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, for instance, Lady Bertilak draws a parallel between Gawain's handsome appearance and the Christian virtues dwelling in his soul, "for þe costes þat I haf knowen vpon þe, knyȝt, here //Of bewté and debonerté and blyþe semblaunt" (ll. 1272-3). Furthermore, according to Mann, medieval aristocracy might have drawn on Aristotle's *Nicomachaean Ethics* in order to support the claim that their social status should also be determined by a different way of dressing, eating, and housing[150].

However, it might be worth emphasising how the extravagance, as well as the wanton wastefulness of these feasts, must have been hardly reconcilable with the Christian prescription for a frugal lifestyle. Excessive food consumption could scarcely be perceived as something different from the deadly sin of gluttony. In this respect, the poet's insistence on the sumptuousness of King Arthur's celebrations might cast a shadow of ambiguity, if not of sharp criticism on his court. However, the ambiguity uncovered in King Arthur's court might also be extended to all late medieval courts and involve some criticism of the Church as well, since it was held responsible for convincing common people that the sumptuous lifestyle of the ruling class was absolutely necessary[151]. Therefore, religious impositions were essential allies to knighthood in persuading common people to endure the burden without complaining, as the hierarchical order of society essentially mirrored that of God's creation[152]. To the Catholic soul, the unworthiness of the clergy never tarnishes the deservedness of the institution[153]. The Gawain-poet seems to participate in the

[147] Clein, pp. 20-1.
[148] Jill Mann, 'Courtly Aesthetics and Courtly Ethics in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 31 (2009), p. 236.
[149] H. Bergner, 'The Two Courts. Two Modes of Existence in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"', *English Studies*, 67 (1986), p. 406.
[150] Mann, p. 234.
[151] Pearsall, p. 352.
[152] Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, translated by F. Hopman, Milton Keynes: Blurb, 2019, pp. 55-6.
[153] Huizinga, p. 56.

late medieval debate on the role of the Church. In the second half of the fourteenth century, England was unsettled by the unorthodox views of the Lollards, who questioned the very possibility of human lordship. According to Wycliff, lordship amongst men can be unrelated to deservedness, by being the result of accidents. This view posed a serious threat to kingly legitimacy, so much so that King Henry V severely endeavoured to eradicate the Lollard movement[154]. However, the Gawain-poet, like Chaucer, seems to be willing to clarify that his criticism is not directed at the institution of the Church, but rather at the behaviour of some members of it: a point that he also clarifies in the very first lines of *Cleanness*. Not only, in contrast to Wycliff, does he believe in transubstantiation, but he also fiercely attacks the corruption and uncleanness of those who should take in their hands the holy body of Christ.

> For wonder wroth is þe Wyȝ þat wroȝt alle þinges
> Wyth þe freke þat in fylþe folȝes Hym after –
> As renkez of relygioun þat reden and syngen,
> And aprochen to Hys presens, and prestez arn called;
> Thay teen vnto His temmple and temen to Hymseluen,
> Reken with reuerence þay rychen His auter,
> Þay hondel þer His aune body and vsen hit boþe.
> If þay in clannes be clos þay cleche gret mede;
> Bot if þay conterfete crafte and cortaysye wont,
> As be honest vtwyth and inwith alle fylþez,
> Þen ar þay synful hemself and sulped altogeder
> Boþe God and His gere, and Hym to greme cachen. (ll. 5-16)

In *The Canterbury Tales*, for instance, Chaucer's satire of the clergy peaks in the description of the Pardoner and the Summoner; however, even with these debased instruments, the grace and the justice of God are allowed to triumph[155]. Therefore, Chaucer never questions the worthiness of the clergy, but rather of those people who, regardless of their role in society, take advantage of others.

The description of banquets is standard material for Arthurian romances, even though excessive insistence on details was usually perceived as a mark of bad form[156]. Therefore, the Gawain-author acutely remarks that there is no need to linger over details, since the meal was customarily

[154] Maurice Keen, *England in the Later Middle Ages: a Political History*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2005, p. 186.
[155] Arthur Hoffman, 'Chaucer's Prologue to Pilgrimages: The Two Voices', *English Literary History*, 21 (1954), p.16.
[156] Joachim Bumke, *Courtly Culture: Literature and Society in the High Middle Ages, (Höfische Kultur: Literatur und Gesellschaft im hohen Mittelalter)* translated by Thomas Dunlap, Oxford: University of California Press, 1991, p. 181.

abundant, "now wyl I of hor seruise say yow no more" (l. 130). In *Yvain ou le Chevalier au Lyon,* for instance, the description is limited to a few remarks on the nobility of the dishes served:

> La nuit fu serviz au mangier
> De tanz més que trop en i ot;[157] (ll. 5442-3) 220-1

According to Brewer, in the late Middle Ages a number of writers devoted their pens to listing the fundamental features of a perfect feast[158]. For instance, in chapter 23 of the sixth book of *De Proprietatibus Rerum*[159]*,* the thirteenth-century author Bartholomaeus Anglicus provides a full list of thirteen qualities that feasts should possess. The first three points of the list state that a feast should be held at a proper time, in a suitable place and with merriment in the host's heart.

> Þe ferste is couenable tyme, for hit is semeliche þat a soper be imaad in dwe tyme, nouȝt to erlich noþir to late. The secounde is couenable place, large, mery, and siker. Þerfore it is iseide [of] Assuerus þat he made his feste tofore an orcheȝard þat was i*hewe* doun. The þridde is þe herte and glad chere of hym þat make þe feste; þe sopere is noȝt worthe ȝif þe lord of þe hous is heuycherid, *Hester I°:*Whanne he wexith hoot, *et cetera*[160].

No doubt, the place and the time of Arthur's feast cannot be more appropriate, since it is Christmas time and the setting is the court of Camelot. If on the one hand Arthur appears to be conveniently merry (*joly*) in his youthfulness (*of his joyfnes*) – as prescribed by the manual, on the other, he appears to be somehow restless.

> His lif liked hym lyȝt; he louied þe lasse
> Auþer to longe lye or to longe sitte,
> So bisied him his ȝonge blod and his brayn wylde. (ll. 87-9)

Although Arthur's solemnly proclaiming his unwillingness to eat until a marvel is told might be considered yet another sign of his immaturity, it was quite a cliché in Arthurian romances and was

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[157] "That evening he was served so many courses // at dinner that there were far too many." Chrétien de Troyes, *The Knight with the Lion, or Yvain (Le Chevalier au Lion),* edited and translated by William W. Kibler*,* New York: Garland Library of Middle English Literature, 1985, pp. 220-1.

[158] Brewer, p. 134.

[159] This book also proves to be linked to the royal household, since, for instance, Thomas of Woodstock, uncle to the King Richard II possessed a copy of it. V. J. Scattergood, 'Literary Culture at the Court of Richard II', in V.J. Scattergood and J. W. Sherborne eds., *English Court Culture in the Later Middle Ages*, New York: Duckworth, 1983, p. 34.

[160] All the quotations are taken from John Trevisa's translation. Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *On the Properties of Things, John Trevisa's Translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus De Proprietatibus Rerum,* edited by M. C. Seymour, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975, p. 331.

usually the catalyst of quests and actions[161]. In *Perceval,* for instance, the King equally proclaims that he will not eat until some news is reported to him.

> [Que] ja par les ial
> Ne mangerai a si grant feste [Pentecost],
> Que je cort anforciee tiegne,
> Tant qu'a ma cort novele viegne.(ll. 2789-92)[162]

Although, according to Clein, the delaying of the feast might reveal, once again, the superiority of civilisation over nature, the subsequent lines cast yet another shadow on Arthur's rather puerile behaviour[163]. Arthur is willing to jeopardise his own life and consequently his own kingdom only to be offered some entertainment on a celebration day.

> Oþer sum segg hym biso3t of sum siker kny3t
> To joyne wyth hym in iustyng, in jopardé to lay,
> Lede, lif for lyf, leue vchon oþer,
> As fortune wolde fulsun hom, þe fayrer to haue. (ll. 96-9)

Returning to Bartholomaeus Anglicus's list, its eleventh point stresses how feasts should also function as a disruption to the daily routine, a moment in which people take their rest after a hard working day.

> Þe enleuenthe is longe duringe of þe soper, for men vsiþ aftir ful ende of work and of trauaile to sitte longe at þe sopere, for mete i-ete to hastiliche greueþ a3enst ni3t. Þerfore [f.77 ra] at þe sopere me schal ete be ese and nou3t to hastilyche. Therefore Assuerus his feste durede longe seuenscore dayes and ten.[164]

In the case of Arthur's court, the celebrations come in the midst of knightly deeds, which seem to be the sole preoccupation of the King and his knights. On the contrary, at Bertilak's court, banquets seem to crown days of intense hunting activity. It is still an occupation related to an aristocratic milieu; nonetheless, it might be only peripherally rooted in a romance dimension. The fourth, the fifth, and the tenth points are dedicated to food and drink, which must be so abundant and varied that the host's magnanimity is celebrated.

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[161] Bergner, p. 407.
[162] "(for) I swear by the eyes in my head // that I'll not partake of food on such a great feast, // whether or not I am holding high court, // until some worthy news come to my court." Chrétien de Troyes, *The Story of the Grail (Li contes del Graal), or Perceval*, edited by Rupert T. Pickens, translated by William W. Kibler, New York: Garland Library of Middle English Literature, 1990, pp. 138-9.
[163] Clein, p. 21.
[164] Bartholomaeus Anglicus, p. 331.

> Þe ferþe is many diuers messes, so þat who þat wole not [of] on, taste of another, *Hester I°*: [In oþir and oþir. Þe fifþe is diuers wynes and drinkes, *Hester primo*]: Wyn was ibrouȝt, *et cetera.*[165]

> Þe tenþe is deliciouste of alle þet is sette vppon þe borde. For me vsiþ not at soper to se[r]ue men with grete me[te] and comyn as me doþ at mete but with special liȝt mete and delicious, and namliche in lordis courtes.[166]

In the late Middle Ages the abundance of food served on aristocratic tables was such that food had become a sign of distinction, rather than a means of sustenance. Therefore, the variety of food and drink was essential in order to stimulate people's appetite. The sixth and the seventh points are conversely dedicated to the loyalty of the servants as well as to the courtesy of the guests.

> The sixte is curtesie [and] honest[e] of seruantz, *Hester I°*: He settiþ of his princez to be maistres ouer þe *b*ordis, *et cetera.* Þe seuenthe is kende frendschip and companye of ham þat sittiþ at þe soper, *Hester I°*: He made a feste into alle þe Medes.[167]

The eighth point is dedicated to music and to those entremets that were so popular in late medieval Europe, whereas the ninth is dedicated to the illumination of the hall.

> Þe eiȝthe is mirþe of song and of instrumentis of music. Noble men visiþ not to make soperes wiþout harpe oþir simphone, *Luce 15°:* Whanne he herde þe symphonyand þe cornemuse, *et cetera.* Þe nynthe is plente of liȝt of candles and of prikettis, and of torchis, for it is a schame to soupe in derknes and perilous also for flies and oþir filthe. Þerfore candels and prikettis beþ iset on candlestickes and chaundeleres, lanternes and lampis, nedfulliche itende. [168]

The entremets were some sort of refined interludes meant to entertain the guests between different courses or even while eating. They were usually symbolically significant and incredibly sophisticated[169]. Furthermore, the use of trumpets and drums to announce the arrival of a new course was an incredibly popular new fashion in late medieval banquets. Bumke, in his *Courtly Culture: Literature and Society in the High Middle Ages,* quotes the thirteenth-century German romance about Gawain's son, *Wigalois,* by Wirnt von Grafenberg in which the use of music is similarly described[170]:

> Den truhzaezzen giengen mite
> Busunaere, die bliesen in vor.
> Man warf die tambur enbor
> Mit slegen, daz der wite sal

[165] Bartholomaeus Anglicus, p. 330.
[166] Bartholomaeus Anglicus, p. 331.
[167] Bartholomaeus Anglicus, p. 330.
[168] Bartholomaeus Anglicus, pp. 330-1.
[169] Brewer, p. 133.
[170] Bumke, p. 189.

Dem gedoene engegen hal.[171] (ll. 9448-52)

The last two points of the list are dedicated to the end of the feast, when people are expected to have gratuitously enjoyed the banquet and finally go to sleep.

> Þe twelfþe is sauete, for wiþoute harm and damage eueryche man schal be prayed to þe sopere. Aftir soper þat is freliche iȝeue hit is not honeste to compelle a man to paye his scot. Þe þrittenthe is softnes and likinge of reste and slepe[172].

All these details sketch a portrait not only of extremely refined courts, but also of almost ritualistic patterns of actions, all associated with ostentation of good manners *sleȝtez of þewez* (l. 916). For instance, medieval romances describe the almost ritual habit of washing one's hands before eating[173]. Another new custom, recently imported from France in the wake of courtly love, was that of eating in pairs, "ay two had disches twelve" (l. 128)[174]. Furthermore, the poet considerably insists on the exchange of gifts, which, according to Brewer, might be considered a manifestation of a very strict code of behaviour, since this practice allows the reinforcing of feudal relationships[175]. Gifts were a crucial part of courtly behaviour, since they symbolised a virtue that was paramount in late medieval ethics, *largesse,* always associated with knights and even more with kings. For instance, King Edward III, considered the very embodiment of all chivalric virtues, is often described as magnanimous in gifting his court[176]. If on the one hand the description of Arthur's court functions as a standard by which any other court – Bertilak's included – should be measured, on the other, it proves to be so made-up that it almost seems a stage on which everyone only plays their part. On the contrary, even though Bertilak's court appears to be not only some sort of provincial and naïve imitation of Arthur's, but also the realm of marvels, it is certainly more dynamic, if not more real than the King's.

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[171] Wirnt von Grafenberg, *Wigalois*, edited by George Friederich Benecke, Berlin: G. Reimer, 1819, p. 347. "Together with the stewards came trumpeters who blared out before them. The drums were beaten so strongly that the large hall echoed with the great sound." Bumke, p. 189.
[172] Bartholomeus Anglicus, p. 331.
[173] For instance, in *Perceval*, this habit is mentioned thrice (ll. 1561-2; ll. 3254-9; ll. 7488-9). Elaine Heather Ruck, *An Index of Themes and Motifs in Twelfth-Century French Arthurian Poetry*, Cambridge: Brewer, 1991, p. 44.
[174] Bumke, p. 188.
[175] Brewer, p. 140.
[176] J. W. Sherborne, 'Aspects of English Court Culture in the Later Fourteenth Century', in V.J. Scattergood and J. W. Sherborne eds., *English Court Culture in the Later Middle Ages*, New York: Duckworth, 1983, p. 7.

According to Mann, the Gawain-poet is not satirising Arthur's court lifestyle, but rather celebrating it, by portraying its magnificence[177]. However, one should also consider that both Arthur's and Bertilak's courts prove to be nests of temptation. Temptation is evident in the scenes taking place in Gawain's bedchamber at Bertilak's castle, but it might be less visible in its subtle creeping out at King Arthur's court. The challenge issued by the Green Knight never implied murder; it was a mere exchange of blows. Therefore, it is Arthur himself, in the ebullience of his youth, who first leads Gawain into temptation, by suggesting him to strike the arrogant visitor down and put an end to the game[178].

> "Kepe þe, cosyn," quoþ þe kyng, "þat þou on kyrf sette,
> And if þou redez hym ryȝt, redly I trowe
> Þat þou schal byden þe bur þat he schal bede after." (ll. 372-4)

At this stage, Arthur seems to show an uncourtly and rather childish behaviour[179], which perfectly matches his description as *childegered* provided by the author. Furthermore, the Green Knight holds both an axe and a branch of holly; it is up to Arthur's court to decide how to decipher the message conveyed by the unknown stranger[180]. The court's interpreting the message as war might somehow be predicted by the previous description of King Arthur's fellowship as unable to renounce battlefield and knightly deeds. They appear to be haunted by the uncontrollable need to prove to themselves they are worthy of their immense renown. As a consequence, Arthur's court seems incapable of accepting any game that does not involve brute fighting[181]. Although Arthur and Gawain represent the embodiment of all knightly virtues, they both fail *cortaysye*: Gawain seems to adhere too strictly to the rules of the court and thus see no other possibility except that of killing the intruder[182], whereas Arthur seems to be essentially forfeiting the rules of hospitality. However, the recourse to brute force seems to be strictly intertwined with the preservation of honour. No insult

[177] Mann, p. 243.
[178] Victoria L. Weiss, 'Gawain's First Failure: The Beheading Scene in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight', *The Chaucer Review*, 10 (1976), p. 361.
[179] Huizinga, p. 149.
[180] Burrow, *A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* p.17.
[181] Weiss, p. 363.
[182] Weiss, p. 363.

can go unpunished, unless one wants to be marked a coward. Therefore, according to Huizinga, bloodshed is what honour needs in order to be satisfied[183]. Any deed of honour would imply some resorting to brute force[184]: as Volumnia would remark in Shakespeare's Coriolanus, "[blood] more becomes a man // than guilt his trophy" (1.3.34-5)[185].

Nonetheless, the author does not seem to criticise Arthur for his Edward III-like temper overtly, but rather cast doubt on his ability as a ruler. According to Mann, Gawain might represent Richard II in his trying to prove a different idea of bravery, not strictly related to warfare[186]. Richard II appeared more concerned about diplomacy than about war and interrupted the belligerent line set by his grandfather, Edward III, and then resumed by his successor, his cousin Henry IV. It must have been hard to believe that, after the triumph on the battlefields of Crécy and Poitiers, the new king, the son of the very flower of chivalry, might want peace with France, instead of war. This might have led to questioning his ability to rule the country. The appropriate skills for good rulers were a theme increasingly debated in the late Middle Ages. Chaucer, for instance, in the *Clerk's Tale*, subtly stresses Walter's inability to rule, since the marquis of Saluzzo proves to be much more interested in hunting, than in the common profit of his country.

> Therwith he was, to speke as of lynage,
> The gentillest yborn of Lumbardye,
> A fair persone, and strong, and yong of age,
> And ful of honour and of curteisye;
> Discreet ynogh his contree for to gye,
> Save in somme thynges that he was to blame;
> And Walter was this yonge lordes name[187]. (ll. 71-7)

The description of Walter's pursuits seems to emphasise both his immaturity and his carelessness for the future. Furthermore, Arthur immediately loses his temper over the provocations of the Green Knight and appears to be ready to risk his throne and his crown, as well as the safety of his subjects

[183] Huizinga, p. 142.
[184] Putter, p. 157.
[185] William Shakespeare, *Coriolanus,* edited by Lee Bliss, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013.
[186] Mann, p. 265.
[187] Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, edited by Larry D. Benson, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 24-5. This is the edition I use throughout.

in order to defend his honour[188]. In medieval literature, the theme of leaving the realm in someone else's hands in order to pursue one's war is crucial: Arthur, for instance, leaves Camelot in order to take revenge on Lancelot and have Guinevere back. This proves to be an ill-fated choice, since, by doing so, Arthur jeopardises his own throne, which will be eventually seized by Mordred. Sir Orfeo too leaves his kingdom, in order to spend his life in grief and voluntary exile. The outcome of his abdication might have been the same as Arthur's, except that the steward to whom he left his realm proves to be a loyal subject. Although Arthur, at this stage, is not planning to leave his country, the result might be the same, since his personal interest appears to overcome common profit. As Pearsall puts it, the Green Knight's challenge is not an "appropriate responsibility for a king to take on"[189]. Gawain's speech, on the contrary, is a masterpiece of courtly rhetoric – and foretells the qualities he will show in the temptation scenes in the third fitt. He manages to take over the King's challenge without dishonouring him.

However, Arthur's description is far from being straightforward: he is not only depicted as immature, but also as one of the greatest kings that ever lived. At the very beginning, he is described as the greatest in courtesy, *Arthur þe hendest* (l. 25), and the finest king, *comlokest kyng* (l. 53), exactly as Edward III was described as *comliche kynge* (l.86) in *Wynnere and Wastoure*[190]. According to the *Middle English Dictionary,* the adjective *cŏmlī* means of noble birth, but also holy, said of Christ and the Virgin. A few lines earlier, Arthur is also defined as the best amongst the most renowned knights except Christ himself, *vnder Krystes seluen.* The representation of Christ as a knight echoes a passage from the seventh book of the thirteenth-century manual for anchoresses, *Ancrene Wisse,* in which Christ's death on the cross is described as a deed of knighthood: "Jesu Cristes cnihtschipe, thet he dude o rode" (l.108)[191]. Gawain as well is described as *comlokest* by Lady Bertilak, in the second temptation scene. However, their all being young might also imply

[188] The death of a king should not be considered as a mere private disgrace, but rather as a national threat, since it exposes the reign to instability and possibly to civil war.
[189] Pearsall, p. 358.
[190] *Winner and Waster*, edited by Sir Israel Gollancz, New York: AMS press, 1975, p. 3.
[191] "Jesus Christ's chivalry, which He did on the cross." *Ancrene Wisse,* edited by Robert Hasenfrantz, Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000, p. 382.

some sort of golden age prior to Lancelot's treason, which caused a breach in the allegiance upon which the Round Table was built. Furthermore, according to John Burrow, one should be cautious in interpreting the youth of the court as a sign of immaturity, since it might also mirror the youth of the New Year and thus plant the seeds of the idea of the renewal of nature, developed at the beginning of the second fitt[192]. The element of renewal connected to the birth of a new year, as well as the reference to a golden age, are certainly additional interpretative keys of the text. Nonetheless, Arthur's unrest as well as his almost compulsive need of an adventure seem to point more in the direction of immaturity, if not insecurity, for he appears to be constantly willing to prove the court that he deserves to rule. This passage might also be interpreted in the light of the same nostalgia for the golden age of Arthur that prompted Edward III to recreate the Round Table[193]. The author seems to lament the debasement of contemporary courts by commenting that however hard one might try, it would be almost impossible, *nye*, in those days, to name another such company.

> For al watz þis fayre folk in her first age,
> On sille,
> Þe hapnest vnder heuen,
> Kyng hyȝest mon of wylle –
> Hit were now gret nye to neuen
> So hardy a here on hille. (ll. 54-9)

Therefore, the Arthurian court does not function as a standard to judge any other court only in fictional contexts, but rather sets a code by which also contemporary courts should live.

The disposition of the guests is strictly hierarchical[194], with the most important amongst them, the *familia regis*, sitting before the *hyȝe table*: Arthur in the middle, Gawain next to the King's wife, Guinevere, Agravain sitting on the other side, and the bishop Baldwin as well as Yvain head of the high table. This representation of Arthur's court conveys the idea of a small and close community, whose very nature is the cause of its downfall. Arthur's household is shaped like a family so that feudal and familiar connections overlap. Since Arthur's kingship is supported by people connected by blood ties, it also entails respect, obedience and love, like in any family. A

[192] Burrow, *A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* p. 5.
[193] Barber, p. 174.
[194] Bumke, p. 183.

community of this kind is certainly shaped in order to resist to external attacks, but it cannot survive internal treason. A breach in the chain of loyalty provoked by any of the family members irremediably leads to the ruin of Arthur's reign. This community entirely revolves around a king that was born in illicit circumstances and would produce no offspring. His glorious and mythical realm is doomed to self-consume in a lifespan. In *Historia Regum Britanniae,* Geoffrey of Monmouth reports the treasonous circumstances of Arthur's conception.

> Commansit itaque rex ea nocte cum Igerna et sese desiderata uenere refecit. Deceperat namque illam falsa specie quam assumpserat, deceperat etiam fictiliis sermonibus, quos ornate componebat; dicebat enim se egressum esse furtim ab obesso oppido ut sibi tam dilectae rei atque oppido suo disponeret. Vnde ipsa credula nichil quod proscebatur abnegauit. Concepit quoque eadem nocte celeberrimum uirum illum Arturum, qui postmodum ut celebris foret mira probitate promeruit. (VIII. 506-12)[195]

However, Uther's treason does not seem to be the sole spot on Arthur's pedigree. As Bertilak reveals to Gawain at the end of his adventure, the sorceress Morgan Le Fay, is Arthur's half-sister.

> Ho is euen þyn aunt, Arþurez half-suster,
> Þe duches doȝter of Tyntagelle, þat dere Vter after
> Hade Arþur vpon, þat aþel is nowþe. (ll. 2464-6)

Although Arthur is undeniably the embodiment of knightly virtues, in Gawain's veins seems to flow not only his blood, but also that of his duplicitous if not mischievous aunt, Morgan Le Fay. Under these circumstances, the shadow of his partial failure might be foretold by Gawain's very nature. Therefore, even though the identity of the Gawain-poet is unknown and thus it is impossible to determine which milieu he belonged to, he seems to stress to what extent blood can play a key role in influencing the hero's very nature. Once again, in spite of evident ambiguities, the poet seems to criticise neither the role of the ruling class, nor that of institutions in general. He seems to accept that a chosen élite of knights might embody perfection and be a source of inspiration for all. Nonetheless, being human, they are not exempt from sin. The shadow of Gawain's partial failure

[195] "The king [Uther] spent the night with Igerna and cured himself through the love-making he had longed for. Igerna was deceived by his false appearance and also by the lies he wove so well; for he said that he had stolen out his castle to look after the thing that he most loved and his refuge. So she trustingly denied nothing that he asked. That very night she conceived the renowned Arthur, whose prowess afterwards secured his fame." Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain (Historia Regum Britanniae),* edited by Michael D. Reeve and translated by Neil Wright, Woodbridge: Boydell, 2007, pp. 186-7.

does not diminish his nobility or courage, but rather emphasises that his great bravery is subjected to the limits of human nature at any rate.

The heroes' travelling from one court to another is standard material for Arthurian romances, where every new court presents new challenges for the hero. At the end of his quest, the hero returns where he belongs as a new person[196], his innermost identity being eventually discovered. Opponents, who stand for different values, are usually never inside the hero's court, but rather in one of the courts he comes across during his quest. In this respect, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is no exception, since different courts appear to have different and sometimes also contradictory moral values[197]. The alternative courtly world is often represented as another world, such as the realm of the fairy king described in *Sir Orfeo*. However, when the opponent is a member of the court, such as in the case of Mordred or Lancelot, his presence can only lead to the court's destruction. Since the court, like a family, is built upon loyalty, a breach in it can only result in the downfall of their entire world[198]. Moreover, as was common in Arthurian romances, Arthur's court seems to be portrayed as quite static, unchangeable and unchanged. In French Arthurian romances, as well as in the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur,* Arthur is involved in real action and wages war, first against Lancelot and then against Mordred, only in the final act of his story; anywhere else he proves to be a *roi fainéant* and his court a mere background for his knights' adventures. In the circular logic of Arthurian romances, in which knights are constantly on a quest, it is essential that, on their return, they find Arthur's court unchanged, as it functions as some sort of guiding star, waiting for some new knights to pick up the baton and take part in the next quest. However, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Arthur is not a mere witness – as in Chrétien de Troyes's narrative – waiting for his knights to be challenged in turn and return from their quests after having discovered

[196] Bergner, p. 403.
[197] Bergner, p. 404.
[198] Bergner, p. 405.

their true identity[199]. He rather plays an active role, since he appears to be capable of tempting Gawain as much as the forest or even Bertilak's court.

Arthur's and Bertilak's courts are described in almost the same terms, in order to emphasise the equal refinement of the provincial court. Arthur's court is equipped with luxurious decors, damasks from Toulouse, as well as drapes from Turkestan.

> A selure hir ouer
> Of tryed tolouse, of tars tapites innoghe
> Þat were enbrawded and beten wyth þe best gemmes
> Þat myȝt be preued of prys wyth penyes to bye
> In daye. (ll. 76-80)

The same exotic atmosphere is evoked in the description of Bertilak's court.

> Of cortynes of clene sylk wyth cler golde hemmez
> And couertorez ful curious with comlych panez
> Of bryȝt blaunmer aboue, enbrawded bisydez,
> Rudelez rennande on ropez, red golde ryngez,
> Tapytez tyȝt to þe woȝe, of tuly and tars,
> And vnder fete, on þe flet, of folȝande sute. (ll. 854-9)

However, the meticulous description of Bertilak's court – starting from the extensive description of the architecture of his castle – might have conveyed the idea of a provincial household, a mere imitation of the royal court. Therefore, even though the features described are almost the same, Bertilak's provincial court seems to be perceived as somehow inferior[200]. When Gawain is welcomed into Bertilak's court, he is admired as a minor copy of the King, the embodiment of the courtly manners they should take inspiration from. This contemptuous perception of provincial courts might mirror the perception that the royal household of both Edward III and Richard II really had for northern courts. These courts were deeply esteemed as they heavily contributed both financially and in terms of men in the war against France; nonetheless, they were considered in a way inferior[201]. If Bertilak's court functions as a tentative imitation of Arthur's, it also casts a shadow of ambiguity, if not of sharp criticism on it. Doubts on Arthur's court are firstly raised by the Green Knight himself, who begins his challenge by questioning the renown of the King's

[199] Barron, p. 74.
[200] Bergner, p. 410.
[201] Bergner, p. 415.

court[202]. Therefore, since the King is still very young, his renown seems to be more related to the inheritance from his brave ancestors, rather than to his own deeds. Yet, as Dante emphasises in the *Convivio,*

> La stirpe non fa le singulari persone nobili, ma le singulari persone fanno nobile la stirpe. (IV.XX.5)[203]

Therefore, the achievements of the ancestors should serve as inspiration to the descendants, but do not guarantee that any of the members of Arthur's court would live up to the expectations raised by the prologue. As a consequence, the concept of nobility seems to have become inadequate to describe both lineage and gentle deeds: the concepts of nobility remained related to blood lineage, whereas that of gentility was created to describe a manner of life and conduct that had stood the test of time[204]. The same issue appears to be raised by Chaucer in *The Wife of Bath's Tale,* where gentility is represented as a matter of individual virtue more related to gentle deeds, than to lineage.[205]

> And he that wole han pris of his gentrye,
> For he was boren of a gentil hous,
> And hadde his eldres noble and vertuous,
> And nel hymselven do no gentil dedis,
> Ne folwen his gentil auncestre that deed is,
> He nys nat gentil, be he duc or erl (ll. 1152-7)

Fame is also strictly intertwined with the heroes' identity: the former cannot exist without the latter. In *Yvain et le Chevalier au Lyon,* for instance, Yvain is asked to provide his name in order for his deeds to be praised.

> Et cil dïent : Ja n'iert teüe
> Ceste bontez, qu'il n'est pas droiz.
> Bien ferons ce que vos voldroiz,
> Mes tant demander vos volons,
> Sire, qant devant lui serons,
> De cui nos porrons nos löer

[202] Bergner, p. 413.
[203] Dante Alighieri, *Convivio*, edited by C. Vasoli and D. De Robertis, Milano: Einaudi, 1988, p. 187. "The stock does not ennoble the several persons, but the several persons ennoble the stock." Dante Alighieri, *The Convivio of Dante Alighieri*, translated by Philip H. Wicksteed, London: J.M. Dent, 1903, p. 326.
[204] Nigel Saul, *For Honour and Fame,* London: The Bodley Head, 2011, p. 177.
[205] Saul, p. 177.

Se nos ne vos savons nomer[206] (ll.4284-90)

The provincial castle is also described as some sort of fairy world characterised not only by disguise, but also by lack of identity. The only person who is given a name, during Gawain's stay at Bertilak's court, is Gawain himself. We are given the name neither of Bertilak's wife, nor of her chaperone, nor even of the lord of the castle himself, which will be revealed only at the Green Chapel. Furthermore, Gawain's ignoring the Green Knight's name not only triggers several speculations on his nature,[207] but also reinforces the perception of his hostility[208]. Furthermore, in a courtly environment, based on reputation, Gawain's name would set some expectations due to his renown[209]. Therefore, had it been a standard Arthurian romance, no one would ever have doubted whether Gawain would have been able to live up to the expectations set by his name and reinforced by the pentangle portrayed on his shield; on the contrary, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the shadow of human fallibility undermines the untarnished reputation of the hero. The importance of renown and the preoccupation of losing one's name might delineate a contrast at the very heart of medieval morality: renown is the means whereby one's name lives on, but it might be easily transformed into sinful vainglory.

Moreover, since Bertilak proves to be the Green Knight himself and the old chaperone, Morgan Le Fay, Bertilak's court appears to be the realm of deception and disguise, where nothing is what it seems. However, this does not come as a surprise, since it mirrors the late medieval love for disguise that often resulted in elaborate plays in extravagant costumes. For instance, the tournament that was held in Le Hem in 1278 was characterised by the reproduction of King Arthur's court, in which the participants were expected to play the heroes of the Round Table[210]. Furthermore, in describing late medieval courts as stages where essentially anyone is only playing their part, the

[206] "And they replied: 'this deed // will not be kept secret, for that is not right. // We shall be pleased to do as you wish, // but we would like to ask, // sire, whom we are to praise // when we come before Sir Gawain // if we do not know your name.'" Chrétien de Troyes, *The Knight with the Lion, or Yvain (Le Chevalier au Lion),* edited and translated by William W. Kibler, New York: Garland Library of Middle English Literature, 1985, pp. 174-5.
[207] Harvey De Roo, 'What's in a Name? Power Dynamics in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight', *The Chaucer Review*, 31 (1997), p. 239.
[208] This topic will be further explored in the next chapter.
[209] De Roo, p. 236.
[210] Barber, p. 82.

author is furthering a point also made by Chaucer in the *General Prologue* of the *Canterbury Tales*. Both authors emphasise a change in the perception of chivalry, which was not related to bravery on the battlefield any longer, but rather to the ostentation of refinement in luxurious courts. Chaucer's knight is depicted in terms of bravery and loyalty to his lord.

> A knyght ther was, and that a worthy man,
> That fro the tyme that he first bigan
> To riden out, he loved chivalrie,
> Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie.
> Ful worthy was he in his lordes werre, (ll. 43-7)

On the contrary, his son, the squire, is depicted as a *carpet knight,* more at ease playing instruments and singing than wielding a sword[211].

> With hym ther was his sone, a yong squier,
> A lovyere and a lusty bacheler,
> [...]
> And he hadde been somtyme in chyvachie
> In Flaundres, in Artoys, and Pycardie,
> And born hym weel, as of so litel space,
> In hope to stonden in his lady grace.
> [...]
> Syngynge he was, or floytynge, al the day;
> He was as fressh as is the month of May. (ll. 79-92)

The description of the ambiguity that lies at the heart of late medieval courts might mark a shift towards mimetic fiction. Gawain's genuinely human fear for his life might raise insidious questions capable of undermining the very fabric of courtly idealism[212]. The knightly code states that one should put his own life at risk in order to maintain his honour and reputation untarnished. However, even though Gawain never openly appears to question the knightly code, his growing anguish seems to reveal at least a conflicting soul. After all, he realises he is a mere man, not gifted with any special powers, as he himself stresses at the Green Chapel, "bot þaȝ my hede falle on þe stonez, I con not hit restore" (ll. 2282-3). The night before the day in which he is supposed to die, the author keeps his audience outside his hero's mind.

> Ȝif he ne slepe soundyly say ne dar I,

[211] Jason Scott-Warren, *Early Modern English Literature*, Cambridge: Polity, 2005, p. 62.
[212] Pearsall, p. 352.

For he hade muche on þe morn to mynne, ȝif he wolde,
In þoȝt.
Let hym lyȝe þere stille;
He hatz nere þat he soȝt.
And ȝe wyl a whyle be style,
I schal telle yow how þay wroȝt. (ll. 1991-7)

No account of Gawain's dreams is provided by the author, but rather the portrait of an anguished man, who can barely sleep. Gawain might well have had some appalling nightmares, but probably not of the same prophetic sort as those that foretell Arthur's downfall, in both the *Alliterative Morte Arthur* (ll. 3168-87) and the *Stanzaic Morte D'Arthure* (ll. 3230-3393). Gawain thus fails to fit the portrait of the traditional romantic hero, who does not fear for his life, since his existence is as much made of paper as the book that contains it.

Tournaments are not the only games described in the poem. According to Stevens, the word *game* (with the alternative spelling *gomen)* is repeated seventeen times in the poem, whereas its synonym *layk* is repeated an additional eight times[213]. Therefore, the ludic dimension proves central to the poem. The Green Knight himself presents his challenge as a *Crystemas gomen,* whereas Lady Bertilak describes her flirtations with Gawain as the "layk of luf" (l.1513) and, a few lines after, declares that she is willing to "lerne at yow sum game" (l. 1531), evidently referring to the game of love. The "Beheading Game" offered by the Green Knight might be interpreted as some sort of single combat, which was, like tournaments, standard material for Arthurian romances[214]. Although the insults the Green Knight throws at the court might be considered a righteous cause for a single combat[215], the challenge develops in unexpected ways. It does not turn into a joust or a single combat – both codified ways to avenge the court's offended honour[216] – but rather in wanton murder. One might also argue that no honour is involved in beheading a kneeling man, who is willingly offering his naked neck. It might be worth emphasising that, since the edifying game of honour and bravery could not be performed on real battlefields, late medieval aristocracy created a

[213] Stevens, p. 67.
[214] Stevens, p. 70.
[215] Huizinga, p. 139.
[216] Barber, p. 84.

fictional code, which only retained an aesthetic function[217]. Moreover, the creation of the chivalric code might also have been prompted by the decrease in opportunity for advancement through warfare, which characterised the twelfth century[218]. This decrease also triggered widespread domestic violence that was curbed through the creation of the chivalric code[219]. Romances promoted ideals of honesty, beauty, and virtue aimed at hardening the courage and the sense of duty of an entire class[220]. Only a social class that is not constrained by the necessity to work can have enough leisure and wealth to give birth to such an aesthetic creation[221]. Arthurian romances thus functioned as cultural vectors[222] , so much so that Edward III considered himself another Arthur[223]. Nonetheless, we are under the bewildering impression that the Gawain-poet might be satirising the chivalric code, by outlining not only the violence inherent in the code itself, but also the problematic conflict between two knightly virtues: courtesy and truth[224]. At Sir Bertilak's court, Gawain is stuck to the same social conventions he has grown up with and is consequently incapable of reconciling two contrasting feudal obligations. As soon as the hero reaches Bertilak's castle, he is undressed of his armour and thus of his chivalric identity, and he is dressed anew with the identity of the courtier. Henceforth, he is expected to show his adherence no longer to the chivalric code, but rather to code of courtly lovers[225]. He is no longer the knight of Mars, but rather the knight of Venus.

Late medieval pursuits, such as the game of love and hunting, are characterised by a strict set of rules codified in proper manual of instructions[226]. Many scholars have emphasised that wars, duels, and hunts could also function as metaphors for courtly love; therefore, the lexicon used to describe

[217] Huizinga, p. 152.
[218] Robert Rouse, 'Historical Context: The Middle Ages and the Code of Chivalry", in Leah Tether and Johnny McFayden eds., *Handbook of Arthurian Romance*, Boston: De Gruyter, 2017, p. 14.
[219] Rouse, p. 15.
[220] Huizinga, p. 152.
[221] Huizinga, p. 152.
[222] Rouse, p. 15.
[223] Sherborne, p. 8.
[224] Burrow, *A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* p. 162.
[225] Stevens, p. 71.
[226] Stevens, p. 72.

lovers draws from their semantic field[227]. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* several references to prison, siege, and mercy can be retrieved in all the temptation scenes: "Now ar ȝe tan as-tyt!" (Lady Bertilak; l. 1210); "For I ȝelde me ȝederly and ȝeȝe after grace", (Gawain; l. 1215); "deprece your prysoun" (Gawain; l. 1219). The situation described in the third fitt would perfectly satisfy the requirements of courtly love: Lady Bertilak is an aristocratic married woman; as a consequence, loving her would be both adulterous and appropriate with regards to social class[228]. In this respect, it would be a standard Arthurian romance, except that the relationship between assailant and assailed is reversed: the besieged castle is not a beautiful woman, but Gawain himself and the besieger is conversely the beautiful woman[229]. By doing so, the poet seems to be questioning the very idea of courtly love. Chaucer, in *The Parliament of Fowls,* equally appears to be questioning the meaning of courtly love, which has only become an aesthetic creation, completely detached from any practical purpose[230]. By reversing the terms of the game, the Gawain-poet might participate in the same debate about the meaning of courtly love as Chaucer and thus parody a form that has already lost its significance[231].

The three temptation scenes that take place in Bertilak's castle have been masterfully constructed in order to emphasise the paradoxical nature of both courtly love and conflicting feudal obligations. Gawain finds himself stuck in different and irreconcilable bonds of loyalty: he swore allegiance to his King and thus he is expected to stand up to the court's expectations; he gave his word to the Green Knight and thus he is expected to receive his blow in a year's time; he enters into an exchange of gifts with Sir Bertilak; and finally he swears Lady Bertilak to secrecy about their meetings. Therefore, since it is impossible for him to fulfil all these conflicting agreements, he is forced to betray some of them and to choose between the lesser of two evils. By handing the girdle

[227] Stevens, p. 72.
[228] C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: a Study in Medieval Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 2.
[229] Bergner, p. 411.
[230] Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Parlement of Foulys* edited by D.S. Brewer, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1972, p. 12-3.
[231] Stevens, p. 75.

over to Sir Bertilak, Gawain would reveal the identity of the person who kissed him in the previous encounters; therefore, he would betray the pact sealed with Lady Bertilak. Gawain might have assessed the magical powers of the girdle as well as the consequences Lady Bertilak would undergo if her identity were revealed and decided that the retention of the talisman would not be such a serious sin after all.

Many scholars have also tried to draw a parallel between the temptation scenes in Gawain's bedchamber and the hunting scenes outdoors; however, according to Rooney, the correspondence was built by drawing on the French tradition of love-hunt, which was quite rare in English literature[232]. On the contrary, the motif of the adulterous lovers' meeting whilst the husband is hunting seems to be quite formulaic. For instance, in Malory's *Morte Darthur*, Aggravayne prompts Arthur to go hunting in order to have the opportunity to uncover the adulterous relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere[233]. Nonetheless, it seems that with the hunting scenes, the Gawain-poet is expanding a partially self-standing narrative episode, not necessarily connected with the test pattern of the "Beheading Game"[234]. Even though it may be inaccurate to interpret the hunting scenes as parallel to Lady Bertilak's increasing effort to prompt Gawain to act in accordance with her conception of his identity[235], one should admit that the considerable effort that the Gawain-poet puts into the description of those scenes cannot be accidental. In the first temptation scene, the entrance of Lady Bertilak is described as resembling a supernatural visitation, "to meruayle hym þoȝt" (l. 1196), uncanny and threatening, so much so that Gawain crosses himself, "sayned hym" (l. 1202). This might be expected, since Bertilak's castle is almost portrayed as the realm of fairies. However, the core of Lady Bertilak's argument remains the fulfilment of the expectations set by Gawain's name, "your honour, your hendelayk is hendely praysed //With lordez, wyth ladyes, with alle þat lyf bere." (ll. 1228-9). She also repeatedly questions Gawain's identity as to imply that his behaviour is

[232] Anne Rooney, 'The Hunts in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight' in Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson eds., *A Companion to the Gawain Poet*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1999, p. 158.
[233] Rooney, p. 161.
[234] Anne Rooney, *Hunting in Middle English Literature*, Cambridge: The Boydell Press, 1993, p. 186.
[235] Burrow, *A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* p. 80.

a disappointment to her: “Sir, ȝif ȝe be Wawen” (l. 1480); “Þat bicumes vche a knyȝt þat cortaysy vses” (l. 1491). Yet Gawain himself stresses that Lady Bertilak’s consideration is misplaced: “Þaȝ I be not now he þat ȝe of speken” (l. 1242); “Bot þe daynté þat þay delen for my disert nys euen” (l. 1266). Therefore, the Gawain-poet might have wanted to emphasise the difference between fiction and reality, so much so that one of the most praised heroes of the Round Table reacts at Lady Bertilak’s arrival by pretending to be asleep. However, Gawain’s argument seems to be one and the same: he feels unworthy to inspire any kind of admiration since he feels he does not possess any special qualities. His speech echoes the claim he made at King Arthur’s court of being the weakest of the court, the less worthy. His only merit is to share Arthur’s blood.

> To reche to such reuerence as ȝe reherce here
> I am wyȝe vnworþy, I wot wel myseluen –
> Bi God, I were glad and yow god þoȝt
> At saȝe oþer at seruyce þat I sette myȝt
> To þe plesaunce of your prys; hit were a pure ioye. (ll. 1243-7)

However, if at the beginning one might believe Gawain’s humble words, at this stage, they seem to be far more prompted by the desire to conform to courtly manners, than by real humility. Furthermore, Lady Bertilak posits that anyone who claims to follow the ideal of courtly love should take inspiration from books, which thus function as an authority in matters of love, “Þat bicumes vche a knyȝt þat cortaysy vses” (l. 1491). Lady Bertilak’s words might be yet another way to emphasise the stark contrast between romantic deeds and reality. Gawain is a suffering man, whose mind is troubled by thoughts of death. No wonder, if he does not seem to be preoccupied with conforming to bookish standards.

> And yow wrathed not þerwyth, what were þe skylle
> Þat so ȝong and so ȝepe as ȝe at þis tyme,
> So cortayse, so knyȝtyly, as ȝe ar knowen oute –
> And of alle cheualry to chose, þe chef þyng alosed
> Is þe lel layk of luf, þe lettrure of armes;
> For to telle of þis teuelyng of þis trwe knyȝtez,
> Hit is þe tytelet token and tyxt of her werkkez
> How ledes for her lele luf hor lyuez han auntered,
> Endured for her drury dulful stoundez,
> And after wenged with her walour and voyded her care
> And broȝt blysse into boure with bountées hor awen –

> And ȝe ar kny3t comlokest kyd of your elde,
> Your worde and your worchip walkez ayquere – (ll. 1509- 21)

And yet, in the last temptation scene, Gawain appears seriously concerned with the possibility of offending Lady Bertilak and thus betraying his reputation for refined manners and courtly behaviour, "oþer lach þer hir luf, oþer lodly refuse" (l. 1772). One might also argue that books of knights' deeds for love and fame are undoubtedly romances and that, since King Arthur's court is described in its first age, it might be unlikely that the books Lady Bertilak is referring to had already been written. Therefore, the authority she is using to support her claims has not already come into existence. This use of prophetic material might be compared with the list of the *nine worthies*[236] populating Arthur's prophetic dream in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*: neither Charlemagne, nor Godfrey of Bouillon had been born when Arthur fought at Camlann. Nonetheless, they function as a model of the same knightly virtues embodied by Arthur himself. Furthermore, books do not only function as repositories of knowledge, as well as the means through which heroic deeds can live on, but are also the source of the images furnishing the audience's minds[237]. According to Carruthers, memory might also be populated by the images readers can recreate in their minds while reading books[238]. It is a point made by Lady Bertilak herself, who accuses Gawain of being a different person from that portrayed and safely stored in her mind. How she managed to get such a portrait of Gawain is not revealed; however, it seems as if the current book were reflecting on its own function.

Although the three beasts hunted by Sir Bertilak cannot be considered the representation of Gawain's sins like the beasts hindering Dante's path in *Inferno* I.31-60[239], one might argue that they represent different degrees of nobility. The deer of the first hunting scene can be considered the noblest, followed by the wild boar, certainly less noble, but a fierce enemy that allows a romance digression on Bertilak's bravery. According to hunting manuals, boars should be hunted on

[236] Huizinga, p. 69.
[237] Williams, p. 549.
[238] Mary J. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: a Study of Memory in Medieval Culture,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 276.
[239] Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia*, edited by Umberto Bosco and Giovanni Reggio, Milano: Le Monnier, 1994.

horseback by using spears, since they are extremely fierce and dangerous[240]. As a consequence, Bertilak's attack on foot, using a mere sword, would certainly have been appreciated by the audience as a sign of incredible courage. Hunting scenes were almost a cliché in medieval romances[241] and the subsequent dismembering of the beasts was often described as quite ritualistic. However, the poet seems to linger too long on the details describing the subsequent cutting up of the beasts – especially of the deer. Although these scenes might be another attempt at a realistic description, the exaggerated number of killed beasts (certainly far more than required) appears a step backwards in the direction of romance. Finally, foxes were considered unworthy animals, hunted by using tricks more than bravery. The hunt of this malicious animal[242] foretells Gawain's fall: "I haf fraysted þe twys and faythful I fynde þe. //Now "þrid tyme, þrowe best" þenk on þe morne" (ll. 1679-80). Although some scholars tend to interpret the fox as a sign of Gawain's duplicity[243], it might suggest that on the third day, more cunning would be required. In this respect, it might be considered an almost comic remark, since Gawain has all along failed to grasp the meaning of almost anything happening around him. That same day, he even fails to suspect that since the girdle's hue is green, it might belong to the Green Knight. Therefore, Gawain does not appear to possess any additional knowledge as compared to the other characters of the story. He is a mere man; his viewpoint cannot be higher than that of anyone else.

Gawain might be considered a victim of social conventions to such an extent, that one might believe him to have been forced into accepting the girdle and avoiding giving it back to Sir Bertilak in order to maintain his reputation as well as Lady Bertilak's untarnished. Stevens also notes an interesting shift to the passive voice, in the scene in which Gawain is given the girdle[244]. Stevens suggests that the use of the passive voice might transform the girdle into a sign of providence that has come to Gawain's rescue. However, this might be only Gawain's take on this matter, a possible

[240] Rooney, p. 174.
[241] Stevens, p. 74.
[242] Gaston Phoébus, *La Chasse de Gaston Phoébus Compte de Foix*, edited by Joseph Lavallée, Paris: Bureau du Journal des Chasseurs, 1854, p.72.
[243] Stevens, p. 73.
[244] Stevens, p. 78.

way to justify his acceptance of a talisman. Although magical objects were standard material in romances[245], the green girdle is significantly different. Had it been a standard Arthurian romance, the talisman would have worked, as does the magical ring in *Yvain ou le Chevalier au lion:*

> « Et cest mien anelet prendroiz
> Et, s'il vos plest, sel me randroiz
> Qant je vos avrai delivré. »
> Lors li a l'anelet livré,
> Si li a dist qu'il avoit tel force
> Com a desus le fust l'escorce,
> Qu'el le cuevre, qu'an n'en voit point;
> Mes il covient que l'en l'anpoint
> Si qu'el poing soit la pierre anclose ; (ll.1023-31)[246]
>
> Mais or metés en vostre doi
> Cest mien anel, que je vos prest;
> Et de le pierre quex ele est
> Vos voel dire tot en apert (ll.2605-7)[247]

On the contrary, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* the green girdle is not a fairy-tale magical talisman, but a string of silk imbued with no powers, except that of making Gawain believe it. The description of Morgan le Fay as a loathly lady might be considered yet another fairy-tale element. In fairy tales, as well as in romances, the loathly lady always plays a key role, since she helps the hero out of a difficult situation in a twofold way – as for instance in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*. Therefore, the audience would expect her to have a crucial function in the story, whereas here her role is delayed until the very end of the hero's adventure, where Morgan's machination behind the tests are revealed by Bertilak. As a consequence, magic is only partially granted its rightful place in the story[248]. This reveals a change in the perception of magic in the late Middle Ages. In Chaucer's *The Franklin's Tale*, for instance, the rocks troubling Dorigen's mind vanish not by power of

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[245] T. McAlindon, 'Magic, Fate, and Providence in Medieval Narrative and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight', *The Review of English Studies*, 16 (1965), p. 9.

[246] "'Now take this little ring of mine // and, if you please, return it to me // after I have freed you.'// Than she gave him a little ring // and told him that its effect // was like that of bark over wood, // which covers it so it cannot be seen; // but the ring had to be worn // with the stone enclosed within the first." Chrétien de Troyes, *The Knight with the Lion, or Yvain (Le Chevalier au Lion),* edited and translated by William W. Kibler, New York: Garland Library of Middle English Literature, 1985, pp. 42-3.

[247] "This ring of mine which I am lending you; // and I mean to explain // to you all about the stone." Chrétien de Troyes, *The Knight with the Lion, or Yvain (Le Chevalier au Lion),* edited and translated by William W. Kibler, New York: Garland Library of Middle English Literature, 1985, pp. 106-7.

[248] Bergner, p. 412.

magic, but rather by power of illusion. The scholar recruited by her suitor, Aurelius, precisely calculates the phases of the moon and the consequent tides in order to have the rocks vanished by submerging water. Therefore, in Chaucer's tale, it is the power of imagination that allows the characters to believe that the rocks have really disappeared.

> But thurgh his magik, for a wyke or tweye,
> It semed that alle the rokkes were aweye. (ll. 1295-6)

All in all, Gawain, the very flower of chivalry and member of the most renowned company of knights, appears incapable to meet expectations in a provincial court; his belonging to Arthurian fellowship is of no help[249]. Gawain also shows the absurdity of courtly conventions, which caused him to be struck by contrasting obligations. Furthermore, although according to Putter, castles can be perceived as vanguards of civilisation trying to gain ground to untamed wilderness[250], they also prove to be nests of temptation. Therefore, Gawain, deprived of an increased power of action, is not a hero of romance any longer, but rather a man who has only a limited knowledge of the world. He appears overwhelmed by the fame attached to his name, as well as that related to King Arthur's court, and painfully discovers that there is a price to pay. The Gawain-author might have wanted to explore the eternal conflict between an idealised code and the limitations of human beings[251].

[249] Bergner, p. 414.
[250] Putter, p. 50.
[251] Saul, p. 311.

3. Heroes and villains: the description of the knight's equipment as a means of identity disclosure

In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* the courtly Christian hero is defied by a gigantic towering figure in the same way as Arthur is confronted by the giant of Mont Saint Michel in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure,* except that, in the former, the opponent's appearance is not that of a revolting pagan creature, but rather of a courtier. The author of the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* emphasises the bestial appearance of the giant by using the alliterating /g/ sound.

> Then glopined the glutton and glored unfair;
> He grenned as a grayhound with grisly tuskes;
> He gaped, he groned fast with grouchand lates
> For gref of the good king that him with grame greetes. (ll. 1074-7)[252]

In the *Alliterative Morte Arthure,* as in Arthurian romances in general, the audience can easily predict whom God will make victorious and hence who are the heroes and the villains of the story. This certainty is grounded in an intimate knowledge of the logic underlying medieval judicial duels, also known as ordeals, which were equally common in romances. Ordeals were based on the conviction of the absolute equity of God's justice; as a consequence, there was no need of a trial, since the part God would make victorious would be the one whose cause was just[253]. The Gawain-author was certainly well aware of this practice, since, even though ordeals were outlawed in 1215[254], he mentions this practice, *juise*, once in *Cleanness*, when Abraham tries to persuade God to spare the righteous people dwelling in Sodom and Gomorrah, and once in *Patience*, when Jonah's companions cast him overboard in order for the storm to cease. In both cases, the author emphasises the main characters' questioning of God's ineluctable judgement. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* Gawain seems to be painfully aware of his terrible and inescapable fate, even though, in the logic of ordeals, he should not fear for his life. Given that his cause is just and he is the knight of the

[252] *King Arthur's Death, the Middle English Stanzaic Morte Arthur and Allitterative Morte Arthure,* edited by Larry D. Benson, Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994, p. 43.
[253] Cecilia A. Hatt, *God and the Gawain-poet: Theology and Genre in Pearl, Cleanness, Patience and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2015, p. 186.
[254] Hatt, p. 186.

pentangle, the very embodiment of all courtly and Christian virtues, wholeheartedly devoted to the Virgin Mary, he should not doubt God's will to make him victorious at the Green Chapel[255]. Therefore, Gawain's certainty of death contrasts with his allegedly unshakable faith. However, one should also admit that, in romances, the logic of ordeals is sometimes reversed. For instance, both Isolde and Guinevere manage to escape their fate and be exonerated from any charge, though they are both guilty[256]. Furthermore, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* the boundaries that shape the dichotomy between substance and outward appearance appear to be blurred, and, as a consequence, the role of the characters appears to be all but clearly determined. The quest for *trawte* reverberates throughout the poem and it is visually represented by the pentangle, "bytoknyng of trawþe" (l. 626)[257]. Truth might be uncovered by confronting contrasting viewpoints, thus by means of a maieutic method. In this light, this poem proves to be a didactic poem in which recurrent ambiguities allow the audience to assess different possibilities, in order to come as close as possible to the truth[258]. Medieval authors used to dramatize contrasting abstract concepts in a visual way, for instance by portraying the battle of vices and virtues. Gawain's quest for truth might be compared in some way to Prudentius's *Psychomachia*, where Pride is finally overcome by Humility.

The second fitt opens with a digression in which the passing of the year is paced by each season giving way to the following. The description of the year waning conveys a touch of profound humanity in the representation of Gawain. He lingers at his King's court as long as he can and, at the eleventh hour, he is finally forced to leave unless he wants to be marked a coward. He does not want to die. His departure is postponed to 1 November, the last feast of the liturgical year, followed by the penitential season of advent[259]. Stokes and Scattergood also remark that this choice might not have been accidental, since All Saints' Day is related to the remembrance of the dead and, at this

[255] Hatt, p. 185.
[256] Hatt, p. 186.
[257] The symbolism of the pentangle will be explored in the next section.
[258] Hatt, p. 207.
[259] Hatt, p. 208.

point, Gawain perceives his condition as that of a dead man walking[260]. The feast of All Saints' Day might also mark the end of Gawain, as we know him, as well as the beginning of an adventure that will lead him to a new self-awareness. Furthermore, given the risks involved in facing a wintry northern landscape, Gawain's mission must have been perceived as one of the greatest importance. The magnitude of the social constraints and expectations overwhelming Gawain is emphasised by his awareness that his departure cannot be deferred any longer[261]. The description of Gawain's passing amidst his friends and companions at the court is almost photographic: the poet sketches, before the audience's eyes, a gallery of the most renowned heroes of the Round Table. They gather in order to say farewell to one of the best knights that ever populated the pages of romances. They will remain there, unmoving and unchanged, waiting for his return, waiting for their turn. The poet does not mention Gawain's feelings at his departure, and yet it is possible to glimpse his anguish mirrored in his friends' eyes.

> Þere watz much derue doel driuen in þe sale
> Þat so worthé as Wawan schulde wende on þat ernde
> To dryȝe a delful dynt, and dele no more
> Wyth bronde. (ll. 558-61)

The court is equally certain of Gawain's fate: they lament his departure almost as if they were saying their last goodbye.

The following lines are all devoted to a very common trope in Arthurian romances: that of the arming of the hero. For instance, Arthur's arming prior to confronting the Giant of Mont Saint Michel is meticulously described in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*.

> After even-song Sir Arthur himselven
> Went to his wardrope and warp off his weedes
> Armed him in a aketoun with orfrayes full rich;
> Aboven, on that, a jerin of Acres out over;
> Aboven that a gesseraunt of gentle mailes,
> A jupon of Jerodine jagged in shredes;
> He braides on a bacenett burnisht of silver
> The best that was in Basel, with bordours rich;
> The crest and the coronal enclosed so fair
> With claspes of clere gold, couched with stones;

[260] Myra Stokes, John Scattergood, 'Travelling in November: Sir Gawain, Thomas of Usk, Charles d'Orléans and the De Re Militari', *Medium Aevum*, 53 (1984), p. 78.
[261] Stokes, Scattergood, p. 78.

The vesar, the aventail, enarmed so fair,
Void withouten vice, with windowes of silver;
His gloves gaylich gilt and graven at the hemmes
With graines and gobelets, glorious of hew.
He braces a brode sheld and his brand askes,
Bouned him a brown steed and on the bente hoves; (899-914)[262]

A similar description can also be retrieved in Chrétien de Troyes's *Erec et Enide*, when Erec is armed by Enide before taking part in the tournament of the Sparrowhawke.

La pucele meïsme l'arme,
n'i ot fet charaie ne charme;
Lace li les chauces de fer
Et queust a corroie de cer.
Hauberc li vest de buene maille,
Et si li lace la vantaille.
Le hiaume brun li met el chief,
Mout l'arme bien de chief an chief.
Au costé l'espee li çaint,
Puis comande qu'an li amaint
Son cheval, et l'an li amainne:
Sus est sailliz de terre plainne.
La pucele aporte l'escu
Et la lance qui roide fu,
L'escu li baille, et il le prant,
Par la guige a son le col le pant.
La lance li ra el poing mise:
Cil l'a devers l'arestuel prise. (ll.709-26)[263]

Some key elements of both Erec's and Arthur's armours can also be identified in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. For instance, the "chauces de fer" worn by Erec are called "sabatounz" (l. 574) by the Gawain-poet. Erec, Arthur, and Gawain all wear a coat of mail, called "Hauberc […] de buene maille" in Chrétien's poem, "gesseraunt of gentle mailes" in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, and "bryné of bryȝt stel ryngez" (l. 580) in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*[264]. Alongside their helmet, they all wear an aventail: Erec fastens "la vantaille. Le hiaume brun li met el chief", whereas Arthur wears "a bacenett burnisht of silver" as well as "the aventail". Gawain wears the

[262] *King Arthur's Death, the Middle English Stanzaic Morte Arthur and Allitterative Morte Arthure,* edited by Larry D. Benson, Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994, p. 159.
[263] Chrétien de Troyes, *Erec et Enide,* edited and translated by Jean-Marie Fritz, Paris: Librairie générale française, 1992, p. 78. "The girl herself serves as his squire. // No incantation, charm, or spell // she used, but laced his greaves up well // and tied up each deer-leather thong, // fitted the hauberk with aplomb // round him, all shining liks of mail, // and then she fastened the ventail. // She put the helmet on his head, // and so, armed cap-a-pie, he stood. // Now at his side she belts his sword, // and he requests her, with a word, // to bring the horse. And with a bound, // he leaps upon it from the ground. // The firm, straight lance, the shield, she brings, // and he accepts them, takes them; hangs // the shield securely by its band // and take the long lance in his hand." (ll. 714-31), Chrétien de Troyes, *Erec and Enide* translated by Dorothy Gilbert, Oxford: University of California Press, 1992, pp. 62-3.
[264] Different names are given to the same part of the armour. R. Ewart Oakeshott, *The Archeology of Weapons*, New York: Dover Publications, 2018, p. 175.

"helme" and the "auentayle". The description provided by the Gawain-poet is far more detailed than the abovementioned texts. Therefore, apart from an evident pleasure in lingering on details, the Gawain-poet might also have provided this passage with a different purpose. Instead of using a static description of the knight from tip to toe, the Gawain-author prefers to recreate a realistic image of the hero's arming in his audience's eyes, by portraying the well-ordered passages required to put on the suit of armour. These long descriptive passages are used in order to create an illusion of reality and, at the same time, to set the spotlight on some details that will provide the audience with in-depth evidence of the hero's personality[265]. The meticulous description of Gawain's armour certainly allowed the medieval audience – as well as modern scholars – to recognise the fashion of the day. The author clearly depicts a perfect example of a late fourteenth-century armour[266].

One should also take into account that the description is far more precise and realistic than one might expect from a romance. Since, in the second half of the fourteenth century, armours underwent significant changes according to the hectic pace to which new weapons were developed, it is possible to narrow the range of dates in which such armour might have been constructed. The last three decades of the fourteenth century might be considered a transition period between mail armour and full plate armour[267]. Both the author and the illuminator seem remarkably aware of state-of-the-art weapons and armours. The helmet, for instance, had recently evolved from the kettle-hat[268] to the bascinet, which, despite some artistic exaggeration, is perfectly portrayed by the illuminator as well. Therefore, both author and illuminator must have shared a deep knowledge of the chivalric world.

Gawain's arming is customarily described as a rite: a red carpet is first placed on the floor, "tulé tapit tyȝt ouer þe flet" (l. 568), where the knight is to be dressed in his armour. The ritualistic aura of the first arming scene appears to emphasise that Gawain is still the knight whose untarnished

[265]Thorlac Turville-Petre, *Description and Narrative in Middle English Alliterative Poetry*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018, p. 38.
[266]Michael Lacy, 'Armour I' in Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson eds., *A Companion to the Gawain Poet*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1999, p. 166.
[267] Helmut Nickel, 'Arthurian Armings for War and for Love', *Arthuriana,* 5 (1995), p. 10.
[268] Oakenhott, p. 261.

reputation is represented by the coat-of-arm depicted on his shield. As a rite, the description of the arming of the hero might also be interpreted as a second knighting ceremony[269], in which the direct relationship between Christian faith and courtly virtues is reinforced by the association of Gawain with the pentangle. According to Cherewatuk, in medieval ethical manuals, such as the anonymous *Ordene de la Chevalerie,* or Ramon Lull's *Livre de l'Ordre de la Chevalerie,* the knighting ceremony is portrayed as an echo of the passage from Saint Paul's letters to the Ephesians describing the armour of God[270].

> De cetero, fratres, confortamini in Domino, et in potentia virtutis ejus. Induite vos armaturam Dei, ut possitis stare adversus insidias diaboli: quoniam non est nobis colluctatio adversus carnem et sanguinem, sed adversus principes, et potestates, adversus mundi rectores tenebrarum harum, contra spiritualia nequitiae, in caelestibus. Propterea accipite armaturam Dei, ut possitis resistere in die malo, et in omnibus perfecti stare. State ergo succincti lumbos vestros in veritate, et induti loricam justitiae, et calceati pedes in praeparatione Evangelii pacis, in omnibus sumentes scutum fidei, in quo possitis omnia tela nequissimi ignea extinguere: et galeam salutis assumite, et gladium spiritus (quod est verbum Dei). [Eph. 6: 10-17][271]

Before the knighting ceremony, the prospective squire should take a bath symbolising Baptism and lie on a bed symbolising the eternal rest of death. He should subsequently be dressed in white clothes symbolising the purity of the flesh and covered with a red robe that should encourage him to shed his blood for the Church. A dark hose should remind him of the dust to which he will return after death. He should also wear black shoes as a memento to be cautious against pride, as well as a white silk belt as a symbol of his purity. On his feet, he should wear spurs, as a symbol of the speed at which he should announce and spread the word of God[272]. The knight is thus a knight of God who should be vigilant not against human assailants, but rather against the rulers of the dark world,

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[269] Karen Cherewatuk, 'Echoes of the Knighting Ceremony in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight', *Neophilologus*, 77 (1993), p. 135.
[270] Cherewatuk, p. 136.
[271] *Bible Gateway* https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ephesians+6%3A10-18&version=VULGATE [accessed on 20/02/2020]. "Finally, grow strong in the Lord, with the strength of his power. Put on the full armour of God so as to be able to resist the devil's tactics. For it is not against human enemies that we have to struggle, but against the principalities and the ruling forces who are masters of the darkness in this world, the spirits of evil in the heavens. That is why you must take up all God's armour, or you will not be able to put up any resistance on the evil day, or stand your ground even though you exert yourselves to the full. So stand your ground, with truth a belt round your waist, and uprightness a breastplate, wearing for shoes on your feet the eagerness to spread the gospel of peace and always carrying the shield of faith so that you can use it to quench the burning arrows of the Evil One. And then you must take salvation as your helmet and the sword of the Spirit, that is, the word of God." Translation from New Jerusalem Bible, *Catholic Online,* https://www.catholic.org/bible/book.php?id=56&bible_chapter=6 [accessed on 20/02/2020]
[272] Cherewatuk, p. 136.

"adversus mundi rectores tenebrarum harum". Saint Paul encourages the knights of God to stand firm against the evil of this world and to wear a belt of truth around their waist, "succincti lumbos vestros in veritate". Records of the English royal household indicate that "belt of a knight" and "girdle" were interchangeably used in Middle English[273]. Therefore, by the end of the poem, the green girdle is what Gawain securely fastens around his waist in place of the belt of white silk he wore during the first arming scene.

> Wyth ryche cote-armure,
> His gold sporez spend with pryde,
> Gurde wyth a bront ful sure
> With silk sayn vmbe his syde. (ll. 586-9)

As a consequence, the symbolic meaning of the white belt casts a shadow of ambiguity on Gawain's retention of the green girdle and makes his betrayal even more profound, since the magical talisman – possibly a reward for his resistance to Lady Bertilak's temptations[274] – replaces the symbol of his truth to God's cause. Furthermore, Gawain's failure is ironically reinforced by another piece of his equipment: namely his helmet. In the Middle Ages, helmets also retain a symbolic function: they represent the fear of shame[275]. Therefore, Gawain's kissing his helmet (ll. 605-18) certainly implies his acceptance of chivalric duties[276], as well as his trusting the helmet to give him the strength to keep his word and avoid being shamed.

Some other parts of Gawain's armour also retain a symbolic significance. For instance, Gawain is first dressed with a doublet of precious fabric, "dublet of a dere tars" (l.571), also called gambeton[277] that was worn under the coat of mail for protection and, over it, a cape trimmed with fur, "crafty capados, […] Þat wyth a bryȝt blaunner was bounden withinne" (ll. 572-3). There is no evidence as to the colour of the cape, even though it is possible to assume that it might have been red, since that was its customary colour in the knighting ceremony[278]. Gawain is also likely to have

[273] Cherewatuk, p. 138.
[274] Cherewatuk, p. 141.
[275] Edgar Prestage, *Chivalry: Its Historical Significance and Civilising Influence*, New York: Routledge, 2009, p. 193.
[276] Cooper, Harrison, p. 97.
[277] Oakeshott, p. 268.
[278] Cherewatuk, p. 136.

worn a white *drap* of linen symbolising purity of flesh, as recommended by the *Ordene de Chevalerie*[279]. The *sabatounz* (l. 574) were a crucially symbolic part of late medieval suits of armour. Their absence from the ethical manual should not come as a surprise, since they were a comparatively recent invention; therefore, they could hardly have been mentioned by the author of the *Ordene*. However, the manual similarly recommends wearing the *cauches* in order to be vigilant against pride. According to the *Dictionnaire du Moyen Français*[280], the *cauches* were a part of the armour conceived for leg protection and they were usually made of mail. By the time the Gawain-poet wrote, they had been replaced by sabatons – meant for foot protection – and leg harnesses – meant for leg protection. The two writers are essentially describing the same part of the armour but the second represents the evolution of the first. Since the whole poem is also about humility and the limits of human nature, the emphasis on this part of the armour might not be accidental. Sabatons should function as a memento of the danger of pride, as *superbia* was considered the source of all capital sins. *Superbia* consists in feeling superior to anyone else and ascribing any accomplishment only to oneself. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, this deceitful sin is mentioned by using two different words: *sourquydrye* (with the alternative spelling *surquidré*) and *pryde*. The word *sourquidrye* is used by the Gawain-poet only in this poem, whereas elsewhere he uses the word *pryde* (*Cleanness*, ll. 1678, 1658, 1451, 1350, 1389, 1227; *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ll. 588, 2038, 2437, 681). According to the *Middle English Dictionary*, *sourquidrye* comes from the Old French *sorcuiderie* meaning presumption, arrogance, and thus can be considered a branch of the deadly sin of pride, whereas *pryde* comes from the Old English *prȳte* and retains not only a negative connotation as it is one of the deadly sins, but also a positive connotation as it also means prowess, honour, and glory. The word *sourquydrye* is used only by the Green Knight in two key moments:

[279] *L'Ordene de Chevalerie: avec une Dissertation sur l'Origine de la Langue Françoise, un Essai sur les Étimologies, Quelques Contes Anciens, et un Glossaire pour en Faciliter l'Intelligence,*edited by Hues de Tabarie, Lauzanne: Chaubert et C. Herissant, 1759, pp. 118-9.
[280] *Dictionnaire du Moyen Français,* http://atilf.atilf.fr/scripts/dmfAAA.exe?LEM=chausse;XMODE=STELLa;FERMER;;AFFICHAGE=0;MENU=menu_dmf;;ISIS=isis_dmf2015.txt;MENU=menu_recherche_dictionnaire;OUVRIR_MENU=1;ONGLET=dmf2015;OO1=2;OO2=1;OO3=-1;s=s0f5821ac;LANGUE=FR; [accessed on 18/02/2020]

first when the Green Knight challenges the court and then when he explains to Gawain the reasons for Morgan's transforming him into the Green Knight. In both cases, the Green Knight focuses on the alleged arrogance through which the knights of Round Table defend their reputation. The Green Knight is apparently questioning whether King Arthur's knights deserve the renown they enjoy. Fame might lead to vainglory and thus debase the deeds performed by knights as a form of empty boasting. Therefore, the poet's choice to use the Old French word instead of the Old English used anywhere else might not be accidental. *Pryde* is first mentioned in the arming scene when the poet describes the sabatons as a memento against pride. After this first reference, the word is always related either to the Green Knight or to the green girdle and the consequences its retention will lead to.

Leg harnesses, *vanbraces*, and gauntlets certainly allow the Gawain-poet to depict, in his audience's minds, the image of any knight of their times, since the description is completely consistent with what is known about medieval armours in the late fourteenth century[281]. However, this realistic description is followed by another entirely devoted to Gawain's shield, which shows on the inner side the portrait of the Virgin Mary and on the outer side that of a pentangle. The shield is a device meant for protection, but in the case of Sir Gawain, it seems to combine physical and divine protection, since the earthly device made of solid wood is further reinforced by the divine protection provided by the Virgin Mary. In the Middle Ages, coat-of-arms functioned as a means to recognise the nobles fighting on battlefields or taking part in tournaments, but later they came to symbolise the very essence of a knight, his inner qualities. It does not come as a surprise that all the heroes of the Round Table have their customary coat-of-arms. Gawain is usually represented by a double-headed eagle (as, for instance, in the sixteenth-century manuscript *Livre de Roy d'Armes Monjoye*, MS.e.Mus.78, f. 4r[282]). The meaning of the double-headed eagle is uncertain, even though

[281] Lacy, p. 172.
[282] *Arthurian Coats of Arms,* http://medievalromance.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/Arthurian_coats_of_arms [accessed on 18/02/2020]

it seems to be related to the celebration of Gawain's bravery and warlike spirit[283]. However, as stressed by the author, the pentangle is new, *nwe* (l. 636), to Gawain, since it has never been associated with him[284]. Therefore, it might have been used by the poet in order to convey the idea of a different Gawain[285]. However, the pentangle appears more of a badge, than Gawain's family coat-of arms. In the late fourteenth century, a new fashion consisting in having two different shields with two different images began to develop. One shield was used at war and showed the family coat-of-arms, whereas the other was used for peace – that is in tournaments – and showed a badge chosen by the owner. One of the most famous badges is certainly that of the Black Prince, which depicted three ostrich feathers[286] and the motto *Ich dien* (I serve). Ostrichs had an allegorical significance, since they reminded the Christian knight that he should forget the world and concentrate on heaven, as much as the ostrich forgets its eggs[287]. The motto further emphasises the owner's intention to serve God. In a late medieval courtly environment, that motto might also have been referred to voluntary servitude to the beloved lady. If the pentangle might be considered a badge instead of a coat-of-arms, that would cast a new light on Gawain. Had the pentangle been the heraldic shield of Gawain's family, it would have represented the value of his ancestors; on the contrary, since a badge is a symbol chosen by the owner, it might represent Gawain's self-perception. In this light, the words pronounced by the Green Knight at the Green Chapel resound with disarming evidence, "Ho wayned me vpon þis wyse to your wynne halle // For to assay þe surquidré" (ll. 2457-8): Gawain might really need a lesson of humility.

Apart from the armour, there is another piece of the knight's equipment that contributes to shaping his identity: his sword. It might be impossible to draw a direct parallel between Gawain's receiving his sword in the arming scene and the *collée,* the central part of the knighting

[283] "It appears that Gawain's golden double-eagle is a combination of the device of Judas Maccabaeus and the arms of the Roman Empire." Helmut, Nickel, 'Notes on Arthurian Heraldry: The Retroactive System in the "Armagnac" Armorial', *Quondam et Futurus,* 3 (1993), p. 3.
[284] Hatt, p. 203.
[285] Hatt, p. 203.
[286] Nickel, p. 14.
[287] *The Medieval Bestiary*, http://bestiary.ca/beasts/beast238.htm [accessed on 21/02/2020]

ceremony[288]. Nonetheless, Gawain's sword is expected to play a central role, as was customary in Arthurian romances, where swords hold centre stage as the knight's weapon *par excellence.* According to Geoffrey of Monmouth, Arthur wielded *Caliburnus* (afterwards known as Excalibur) in the battle against the Saxons[289]. The magic blade, forged on the Isle of Avalon, was made invincible by the additional power of Christian faith: "quemcumque attingebat Deum inuocando solo ictu perimebat"[290]. The trope of the hero's magic sword reverberates throughout European epic poetry. For instance, Roland possesses *Durendal*[291], which is an invincible weapon delivered to the Christian army by an angel. Sigurdr possesses a magic sword, *Gramr*, inherited from his father and personally given to him by Odin[292]. Heroes' swords sometimes also have a life and a will on their own. For instance, when a dying Roland wants to break his *Durendal*, the sword proves to be unbreakable[293]. Similarly, a dying Arthur wants his *Excalibur* to be thrown in the enchanted lake for no man to wield it[294]. The sword is also a symbol of virtue and justice, as well as of the word of God, namely the *glaudium spiritus* mentioned by Saint Paul[295]. Given the importance and the symbolic significance that a sword has for a knight, it should not come as a surprise that, in Arthurian romances, it is in the spotlight during fighting scenes. On the contrary, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* the word sword, *sworde* or *bront* (with the alternative spelling *bronde*), is related to true fighting only thrice. Interestingly enough, twice it is referred to Bertilak's almost heroic deeds while hunting the wild boar (l. 1585) and the fox (l. 1901). In contrast, when the sword mentioned is Gawain's, it is related to action only once, elsewhere it hangs at his side in a precious scabbard (ll. 587, 828), or it serves the purpose of emphasising Gawain's impossibility to fight back

[288] This role has in fact been taking over by the Green Knight's axe. Cherewatuk, p. 139.
[289] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain (Historia Regum Britanniae),* edited by Michael D. Reeve and translated by Neil Wright, Woodbridge: Boydell, 2007, pp. 198-9.
[290] "As he called on God, he killed any man he touched with a single blow. Geoffrey of Monmouth", *The History of the Kings of Britain (Historia Regum Britanniae),* edited by Michael D. Reeve and translated by Neil Wright, Woodbridge: Boydell, 2007, pp. 198-9
[291] *La Chanson de Roland ; et Le Roman de Roncevaux, des XIIe et XIIIe Siècles*, edited by Michel Francisque, Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1869, pp.92-3. (Laisses CLXXII- CLXXIII).
[292] Chiesa Isnardi, p. 380.
[293] *La Chanson de Roland ; et Le Roman de Roncevaux, des XIIe et XIIIe Siècles*, edited by Michel Francisque, Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1869, pp.92-3. (Laisses CLXXII- CLXXIII).
[294] Derek Pearsall, *Arthurian Romance,* Oxford: Blackwell, 2011, pp. 47-8.
[295] Paul, Ephesians 6: 17.

at the Green Chapel (ll. 560, 2042). The only reference to Gawain's wielding a sword is at the Green Chapel. After having received the third blow, he childishly stands against the Green Knight, picks up helmet and shield, and makes himself ready to fight. Gawain's thirst for heroic deeds is so comic that it prompts a reaction midway between amusement and sympathy in the Green Knight. Therefore, the sword serves its purpose only in Bertilak's hands; elsewhere it is either a mere piece of Gawain's equipment or it emphasises Gawain's naivety. This involves yet another ambiguity, since the very symbol of knightly deeds, instead of holding centre stage, is marginalised, or worse, in the hands of someone who will turn out to be the alter ego of the villain.

The effigy of Edward the Black Prince is the best-known example of the transitional type of armour described in the poem. Edward of Woodstock was heir apparent to King Edward III, as well as the first knight of the newly founded Order of the Garter[296]. His renown was already immense when he was alive and his youthful deeds outlived him, so much so that he was considered the very flower of chivalry. He earned his fame on the battlefield of Crécy, when he was only sixteen years old. Although King Edward III was informed that his son was surrounded, he refused to send him reinforcements and claimed that his son had to win his spurs[297]. Apart from celebrating the bravery of Edward of Woodstock, this passage emphasises to what extent his father considered the deeds of arms the only way to deserve knighthood. The King's reference to his son's spurs outlines the prominent position spurs enjoyed not only in the knighting ceremony, but also as some sort of embodiment of the knightly essence. Furthermore, the prince wrote in his will that he wanted to be buried in a magnificent tomb, in which he would be represented in full armour for his warlike spirit and bravery to be remembered forever[298]. In spite of his presently being a rotten corpse, the martial appearance of the Prince's effigy preserves his knightly identity. Gawain might have wanted to

[296] David Urbach, 'The Crown and the Garter: the Shared Motto of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and Edward III's Order of the Garter', *Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History*, 15 (2010), p. 110.
[297] Barber, p. 237.
[298] David Green, *Edward the Black Prince: Power in Medieval Europe,* Harlow: Pearson Longman, 1969, p. 163.

reach the Green Chapel in full armour for the same reason: he has lived as a knight; he will die a knight.

The Green Knight's outward appearance seems to reveal some inconsistencies inherent in his very nature. He is not wielding a sword, the very symbol of a civilised courtly environment, but rather a weapon more suitable for one of the supernatural foes populating romances, an axe. However, romance villains usually brandish rudimental weapons such as clubs, whereas the Green Knight's axe is magnificently embellished and thus more suitable for a courtly environment. One should also take into account that the axe was widely used during the twelfth and the thirteen centuries. If at the beginning it was considered a weapon for churls, by the time this poem was written, it was considered a respectable weapon also brandished by knights[299]. According to Roger de Hoveden, King Stephen fought with an axe in the battle at Lincoln in 1141[300]. Therefore, the refined axe wielded by the Green Knight perfectly embodies a weapon suitable for both a warrior and a giant. This might be expected, since even though the Green Knight is half a giant, he also retains some courtly features. The author devotes some twelve lines to the description of the axe; nonetheless, he focuses more on its precious details than on its sharpness.

A spetos sparþe to expoun in spelle quoso myȝt.
Þe hede of an elnȝerde þe large lenkþe hade,
Þe grayn al of grene stele and of golde hewen
Þe bit burnyst bryȝt, with a brod egge
As wel schapen to schere as scharp rasores –
Þe stele of a stif staf þe sturne hit bi grypte,
Þat watz wounden wyth yrn to þe wandez ende
And al bigrauen with grene in gracios werkes;
A lace lapped aboute þat louked at þe hede
And so after þe halme halched ful ofte,
Wyth tryed tasselez þerto tacched innoghe
On botounz of þe bryȝt grene brayden ful ryche. (ll. 209-20)

Such a description is certainly customary for heroes' swords, whereas it is quite unusual for an axe. Furthermore, the reference to its fine blade appears to mirror the standard description of Excalibur provided by Chrétien de Troyes, in *Perceval.*

Qu'il avoit çainte Escalibor
La meilleure espee qui fust,

[299] Oakenhott, p. 257.
[300] Oakenhott, p. 257.

Qu'ele trenche fer come fust. (ll. 5868-70)[301]

Some features of the Green Knight's appearance also remind us of a devilish foe and thus make him match the description provided by Saint Paul of the kind of enemies that a knight of God should beware. Furthermore, Saint Paul's emphasis on the shield of faith, *scutum fidei*, which should protect the knight from that kind of foe is further expanded by the Gawain-poet and reinforced through a long digression on the virtues represented by the pentangle. However, even though the Green Knight's appearance is that of a foe, he enters the court unarmed and dressed in fashionable courtly garments.

> Wheþer hade he no helme ne hawbergh nauþer
> Ne no pysan ne no plate þat pented to armes
> Ne no schafte ne no schelde to schwue ne to smyte;
> Bot in his on honde he hade a holyn bobbe
> (Þat is grattest in grene when greuez ar bare)
> And an ax in his oþer, a hoge and vnmete, (ll. 203-8)

Were it not for his being entirely green, his appearance would certainly be familiar to the members of Arthur's court. As Turville-Petre points out, the description of the Green Knight is ekphrastic, as nothing moves[302]. It is not built up like the description of Bertilak's castle, where the closer Gawain gets to the castle the more details are disclosed. Furthermore, Turville-Petre acutely remarks on the contrast between *clene* and *grene*, in the description of the Green Knight[303]. The meaning of the word *clene* is fully explored by the poet in *Cleanness.* The author defines cleanness as skilfulness, moral purity, innocence, transparency, brightness, and elegance. *Clene* might also mean freedom from any kind of filth and, in that, it is described as one of the virtues of the pentangle[304]. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* the adjective *clene* is used fifteen times to refer to both the Green Knight / Bertilak and Gawain. Surprisingly enough, this adjective is used to describe the Green Knight's outfit almost as many times as to describe Gawain's shining armour. This word is also used to describe Gawain's confession, as well as his courteous behaviour with Lady Bertilak. Since

[301] "For he had belted on Excalibur, // the best sword ever made, // which cut iron as if it were wood." Chrétien de Troyes, *The Story of the Grail (Li contes del Graal), or Perceval*, edited by Rupert T. Pickens, translated by William W. Kibler, New York: Garland Library of Middle English Literature, 1990, pp. 288-9.
[302] Turville-Petre, p. 45.
[303] Turville-Petre, p. 42.
[304] Turville-Petre, p. 43.

cleanness and courtesy prove to be strictly intertwined in the endless knot of the pentangle, the Gawain-poet might have wanted to free Gawain's courteous behaviour from any sexual innuendo, "His clannes and his cortaysye croked were neuer" (l. 653), "wyth clene cortays carp closed fro fylþe" (l. 1013), "And cortaysye is closed so clene in hymseluen" (l. 1298). Therefore, it is also possible to infer that the poet might be trying to clarify the contradictory nature of the Green Knight: his appearance is that of a foe; nonetheless, his description is marked by the recurrent use of the word *clene*. Furthermore, the poet also focuses on a crucial detail of the Green Knight's outfit, namely his spurs. They might be considered a marginal detail, unworthy of any mention; however, if on the one hand the poet's describing the Green Knight's spurs as "clene spures vnder //Of bryȝt golde" (ll. 158-9) might be considered yet another sign of his passion for long descriptive passages, on the other, he might have wanted to refer to their symbolic function, as a means to spread the Word of God. According to Beauregard, the Green Knight might also represent, on a moral level, the virtue of fortitude, his beheading being a form of martyrdom, whereas on an allegorical level, it would represent the Word of God[305]. Therefore, the poet's mentioning the spurs might be insufficient to confirm Beauregard's hypothesis, but it would at least cast yet another shadow of ambiguity on the opaque nature of the creature facing the court.

However, there is a second arming scene in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight:* that taking place at Berilak's castle. This second arming scene is certainly restrained, possibly to emphasise Gawain's failure in giving up the green girdle. Although played down, this scene seems to function as a re-enactment of the knighting ceremony. According to the ceremony of the investiture, the knight should confess, spend the night sleepless and in prayer, and hear Mass before the ceremony. In this light, it is striking to notice that Gawain does confess before reaching the Green Chapel, but does not hear Mass, or at least the poet does not account for it. That appears a disturbing circumstance, since Gawain has heard Mass every single day during his stay at Bertilak's castle[306].

[305] Beauregard, p. 150.
[306] Cherewatuk, p. 142.

Furthermore, Gawain spends the night sleepless, even though he is not reported to have spent the night in prayer[307]. Therefore, given that prior to the first arming scene, Gawain performs all the duties required by the ceremony, whereas prior to the second he only performs some of them, the second arming scene might be considered a parodic re-enactment of the first[308]. However, what Gawain would probably not expect is to have the knighting ceremony re-enacted at the Green Chapel. According to Cherewatuk, the Green Knight not only provides the *collée*, but also initiates Gawain to a higher form of chivalry, one securely rooted in humility[309]. Only at the end of the ceremony does the Green Knight call Gawain "Sir" and thus recognise him as a knight[310]. After having received an insight of what being a knight really means, Gawain can now stand as a proper knight of God. Nonetheless, he remains a mere man and thus he cannot completely understand the extent of what being a knight of God really means. When the Green Knight fails to behead him, Gawain immediately stands and wields his sword in order to fight back. His naïve reaction proves that in spite of all the tests he underwent, he still retains some features of his previous identity. Therefore, the symbolism of renewal that reverberates throughout the poem is only partially fulfilled: Gawain's situation somehow appears to have come full circle. At the end of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, it is almost impossible to decide whether Gawain really returned to King Arthur's court a new person and the second reading of the poem, instead of offering new insights, casts more shadows than those it manages to dissipate.

3.1 Gawain, the hero of the pentangle

The passage devoted to Gawain's armour ends with a reference to an additional protective device: his helmet. The physical protection provided by the helmet is reinforced by his being decorated with a circlet encrusted with diamonds.

[307] Cherewatuk, p. 142.
[308] Cherewatuk, p. 142.
[309] Cherewatuk, p. 141.
[310] Cherewatuk, p. 143.

Þe cercle watz more o prys
Þat vmbeclypped hys croun,
Of diamauntez a deuys
Þat boþe were bryȝt and broun. (ll. 615-8)

According to medieval lapidaries, brown diamonds could function as a protection against ghosts and spirits, exactly the kind of creatures Arthur's court believes the Green Knight to be, "Forþi for fantoum and fayryȝe þe folk þere hit demed" (l. 240). Bartolomaeus Anglicus, for instance, describes in his *De Proprietatibus Rerum* the protective properties of diamonds.

> Also as Diascorides seiþ, þe vertu of suche a soon yborne in þe left schuldre or in þe armeputte helpeþ aȝens enemyes, aȝeins woodnes, chydyng, and stryf, and aȝens feendes þat deryen men and wommen in her sleepe, aȝeins fantasie, aȝeins sweueenes, and venym.[311]

However, the lapidaries specify that precious stones could protect the owner against evil only as long as he remained chaste[312], a warning that Gawain must have kept in mind when Lady Bertilak teased him. Furthermore, Gawain's retaining the green girdle might uncover an inclination to trust the power of talismans. Therefore, Gawain's restraint in the temptation scenes might also have been prompted by his relying on any talisman in his possession in order to survive the Green Knight's blow. In this light, the diamonds on Gawain's helmet are in no way different from the girdle.

The passage devoted to the description of the pentangle begins with a large rubricated initial, thus marking a descriptive passage that should offer an interpretative key to the whole poem. According to John Burrow, in Arthurian romance tradition, there are two kinds of hero: the Yvain type and the Perceval type[313]. In the first case, the relationship between the court and the hero is clearly determined: all the knights of the court will eventually be engaged in an adventure; in the meantime, the other members of the community will patiently wait their turn[314]. A small number of selected knights will certainly be remembered for their extraordinary courage and deeds, whereas the others will only serve as a term of comparison in order to allow the heroes to stand out. On the contrary, in the narrative of the Grail, the heroes are elect beings, chosen for their moral excellence,

[311] Bartolomaeus Anglicus, p. 834.
[312] Larry Dean Benson, *Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1965, p. 91.
[313] Burrow, *A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,*p. 8.
[314] Burrow, *A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* pp. 8-9.

whereby they will succeed where all the others have failed. John Barrow's classification leads to questioning what kind of hero this Gawain will be. On the surface, the identification of Gawain with the pentangle leaves no doubts: he is more of a knight of supernatural perfection, closer to Galahad than to the Gawain the audience is used to[315].

> And quy þe pentangel apendez to þat prynce noble
> I am in tent yow to telle, þof tary hyt me schulde (ll. 623-4)

In a narrative of this kind, Arthur, as well as his court, represents common humanity, doomed to fail by their inherent sinfulness. Gawain is described as faultless in any possible way[316]; nonetheless, he is still very young. Consequently, one might wonder how many times, if any, he could have been tested. In spite of the very few (if any) occasions in which he could have shown that he really deserves to be represented by the pentangle, he is considered a model of knighthood[317].

> Fyrst he watz funden fautlez in his fyue wyttez.
> And efte fayled neuer þe freke in his fyue fyngres.
> And alle his afyaunce vpon folde watz in þe fyue woundez
> Þat Cryst kaȝt on þe croys, as þe Crede tellez.
> And queresoeuer þys mon in melly watz stad,
> His þro þoȝt watz in þat, þurȝ alle oþer þyngez,
> Þat alle his forsnes he fong at þe fyue joyez
> Þat þe hende Heuen-Quene had of hir Chylde. (ll. 640-6)

The Gawain-poet demonstrates Gawain deserves the pentangle by means of a syllogism: the pentangle is a symbol of truth, Gawain is faithful and thus true; therefore, the pentangle befits Gawain[318]. However, as in any syllogism, the conclusion is correct only as far as both premises are true. On the contrary, in this case, both premises are somehow questionable. Assuming that the major premise is true, namely that the pentangle is a symbol of truth, the minor premise might be at least not provable, since, as mentioned before, Gawain is still very young and thus unlikely to have proved his faithfulness. This point can be illustrated with reference to another poem, *Pearl,* in which the poet equally seems to raise questions about deservedness. In particular, the jeweller is

[315] Benson, p. 95.
[316] Benson, p. 102.
[317] Benson, p. 103.
[318] Gerald Morgan, 'The Significance of the Pentangle in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"', *Modern Humanities Research Association,* 74 (1979), p. 770.

wondering how his daughter can possibly be a queen in heaven, since she died when she was just a toddler.

> "That Cortayse is to fre of dede,
> Ȝyf hyt be soth that thou conez saye.
> Þou lyfed not two ȝer in oure þede;
> Þou cowþes never God nauþer plese ne pray,
> Ne never nawþer Pater ne Crede –
> And quen mad on þe fyrste day!
> I may not traw, so God me spede,
> Þat God wolde wryþe so wrange away.
> Of countes, damysel, par ma fay,
> Wer fayr in heven to halde asstate,
> Other ellez a lady of lasse aray –
> Bot a quene! – hit is to dere a date." (ll. 481-92)

Pearl's answer clarifies the whole matter: in spite of her young age, she is in heaven by means of God's grace. Therefore, in order to deserve the pentangle, Gawain should solely rely on the inner virtues God provided him with by means of His grace, instead of proudly believing that his alleged perfection is due to his social grace. Gawain proves to be at his best in the wilderness[319], when he solely relies on his faith and inner qualities, rather than in his courtly environment, where he seems to overestimate the importance of social conventions.

However, the major premise's truth might also be questionable. According to Hamilton Green, the pentangle being described as a symbol of Solomon might trigger conflicting reactions[320]. In the Middle Ages, the Jewish King was considered a figure of Christ, famed for his wisdom and ability to rule. Nonetheless, in the Bible, he is also described as a sinner, guilty of some follies that cost him his kingdom[321]. His weakness for women turned him away from God and caused his ruin. At the Green Chapel, Gawain himself compares his failure with Solomon's and fiercely accuses women for being the cause of damnation for all humankind.

> Bot hit is no ferly þaȝ a fole madde
> And þurȝ wyles of wymmen be wonen to sorȝe;
> For so watz Adam in erde with one bygyled,
> And Salamon with fele sere, and Samson eftsonez –
> Dalyda dalt hym hys wyrde – and Dauyth, þerafter
> Watz blended with Barsabe, þat much bale þoled. (ll. 2414-9)

[319] Hatt, p. 195.
[320] Hamilton Green, p. 130.
[321] Hamilton Green, p. 130.

Interestingly enough, the Gawain-poet uses yet another syllogism in order to illustrate Gawain's point. The hero's argument is that since many great men were ruined by women, and he himself is a mere man, he had no other possibility except that of being deceived. However, since the pentangle is associated with Solomon, who symbolises both perfection and ruin, the endless knot must enjoy the same twofold fame as the Jewish king's; therefore, not only does this association weaken the major premise upon which the syllogism is based, but it also somehow foretells Gawain's failure[322]. Solomon's twofold fame should not come as a surprise; it is precisely what the poet specifies at the beginning of his creation: the story of England, as well as the story of the world is marked by alternating success and failure, *blysse and blunder* (l. 18), and so is the life of any man. Solomon is no exception. One might also consider that, in the Middle Ages, the fame Solomon enjoyed was also related to magic[323]. In this respect, the twofold symbolism of the pentangle might lead to a logical paradox. On the one hand, its being related to magic might mirror Lady Bertilak's token of untruth, namely the green girdle, on the other, its simultaneously being a token of truth might also make it its opposite.

However, apart from the ambiguity possibly raised by this reference to Solomon, the pentangle is described as the symbol that connects all knightly virtues. In the Middle Ages, the pentangle, like the pentagon, was not considered a symbol of supernatural perfection, but rather of natural perfection[324]; therefore, it perfectly embodied the kind of perfection human beings could aspire to. Consequently, the pentangle is the symbol of human excellence[325], since it possesses greater unity than a quadrangle, symbol of human nature, but it is still not a circle, symbol of the divine[326]. As Morgan points out by quoting Dante's *Convivio*, nobility is the highest degree of perfection that something can achieve according to its very nature[327].

[322] Hamilton Green, p. 132.
[323] Hamilton Green, p. 131.
[324] Hamilton Green, p. 132.
[325] Morgan, 'The Significance of the Pentangle in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"', p. 773.
[326] Morgan, 'The Significance of the Pentangle in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"', p. 782.
[327] Morgan, 'The Significance of the Pentangle in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"', p. 773.

> Dico adunque che, se volemo riguardo avere de la commune consuetudine di parlare, per questo vocabulo "nobilitate" s'intende perfezione di propria natura in ciascuna cosa. (Convivio, IV.XVI.4)[328]

Nobility does not convey the idea of absolute perfection, which would solely belong to God as the Creator, but rather relative perfection, that is the best something can achieve considering the limits set by its nature. In this respect, Gawain cannot aspire to divine perfection, since he is no saint and the pentangle would befit him only as far as he could prove he possesses inherent nobility. Thus, the hero should also prove that the spiritual, social, and moral virtues intertwined in the pentangle are united in his own person[329]. Furthermore, his actions will be measured by the standard set by the pentangle. In this respect, Gawain is certainly the embodiment of Christian chivalry[330]; however, the crushing burden of such high expectations also contributes to emphasising his failure. In the passage devoted to the pentangle, Gawain's human limits are never acknowledged; on the contrary, the hero only seems to be judged by standards of unachievable perfection. According to John Burrow, the symbolism of the pentangle is also reinforced by its being gold, which is the colour of righteousness and integrity[331]. At this stage, the ambiguity raised by the double symbolism of the pentangle makes it impossible to determine what kind of hero Gawain will prove to be. The Gawain-poet continuously provides misleading details in order not only to maintain a state of suspense, but also to emphasise to what extent the dynamics in real life are not as simple as in romances.

After explaining why the pentangle befits Gawain, the author proceeds by clarifying the number symbolism underlying this token of truth. The five points of the pentangle represent the five fingers, which conventionally stand for five virtues: the thumb is a symbol of justice, the index of prudence, the third finger of temperance, the ring finger of fortitude and the little finger a symbol of obedience

[328] Dante Alighieri, *Convivio*, Milano: Einaudi, 1988, p. 178. "I say, then, that if we would have regard to the common custom of speech, this word 'nobleness' means the perfection in each thing of its proper nature." Dante Alighieri, *The Convivio of Dante Alighieri*, translated by Philip H. Wicksteed, London: J.M. Dent, 1903, p. 310.
[329] Morgan, 'The Significance of the Pentangle in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"', p. 770.
[330] Morgan, 'The Significance of the Pentangle in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"', p. 782.
[331] Burrow, *A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* p. 40.

and respect to divine will[332]. This interpretation points to natural perfection and mirrors the description of the five senses[333]. The author subsequently specifies that five is also the number of the wounds of Christ as well as that of the joys of Mary. The five wounds of Christ are the pillars of Gawain's faith, whereas the five joys of Mary are the source of his strength[334]. Therefore, the poem moves from the domain of natural perfection to that involving the theological virtues of faith and hope[335]. However, the poet's reference to the Virgin Mary is not limited to the symbolism of the pentangle: on the inner side of his shield, there is a portrait of her, which should give him additional strength to overcome any test. The reference to the Virgin Mary is not unprecedented: in Geoffrey of Monmouth's account, Arthur himself had a portrait of the Virgin Mary on the inner side of his shield – called Pridwen – in order to strengthen his faith, "in quo imago sanctae Mariae Dei genitricis inpicta ipsum in memoriam ipsius saepissime reuocabat"[336].

The virtues mentioned in the passage devoted to the pentangle are all moral virtues connected to the courtly environment.

> Þe fyft fyue þat I finde þat þe frek vsed
> Watz fraunchyse and felaȝschyp forbe al þyng,
> His clannes and his cortaysye croked were neuer,
> And pité, þat passez alle poyntez – þyse pure fyue
> Were harder happed on þat haþel þen on any oþer. (ll. 651-5)

The poet first mentions magnanimity, *fraunchyse*, which is the condition of being *gentil*[337], the opposite of being a churl. Magnanimity is at the heart of chivalrous conduct and implies being a part of a sophisticated courtly environment. By being one of the intertwined virtues of a token of truth, namely the pentangle, the knight's magnanimity cannot be a mere display of manners, but rather it must be true. Magnanimity is thus the social virtue that prompts Gawain to take over

[332] Hamilton Green, p. 134.
[333] Hamilton Green, p. 134.
[334] Morgan, 'The Significance of the Pentangle in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"', p. 775.
[335] Hamilton Green, p. 134.
[336] "On which [Pridwen] was depicted Mary, the Holy Mother of God, to keep her memory always before his eyes." Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain (Historia Regum Britanniae),* edited by Michael D. Reeve and translated by Neil Wright, Woodbridge: Boydell, 2007, pp. 198-9.
[337] Morgan, 'The Significance of the Pentangle in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"', p. 776.

Arthur's challenge taking care of not dishonouring him[338]. It might be impossible to determine whether Gawain's humble words at Arthur's court stem from true humility or rather from a display of social grace[339]; nonetheless, Gawain's sacrifice can certainly be perceived as a noble act and thus emphasises a connection between nobility and magnanimity. However, the possibility of Gawain's being prompted by a desire to appear as a model of gentility casts yet another shadow of ambiguity on the pentangle. Therefore, the author might not only be raising the issue of true and false humility[340], but also emphasising to what extent the boundaries between humility and gentility can be blurred. Since the pentangle is an endless knot, in which each virtue is connected to the previous as well as to the following as the links of a chain, the subsequent virtue mentioned by the poet, *felaȝschyp*, should entertain strong bonds with both *fraunchyse* and *clannes*. *Felaȝschyp* is the spirit that binds the Knights of the Round Table together as brothers. Such a relationship can only exist in a courtly environment and thus amongst *gentil* hearts. Like any other virtue of the pentangle, *felaȝschyp* also implies truth, since, in a chivalric context, knights should be bound by ties of loyalty[341]. *Clannes* implies lawful love[342] and thus it is certainly connected with the subsequent virtue, namely *courtaysye*. *Clannes* does not imply chastity, but rather behaving according to the predicaments of the Church[343]. Therefore, the connection with *courtaysye* is evident and reverberates throughout the temptation scenes. As outlined in the previous chapter[344], the Gawain-poet seems to free Gawain's courteous behaviour from any sexual innuendo by defining his courtesy, *clene.*

Courtaysye is an all-encompassing courtly virtue, which stretches from manners to nobility of mind[345]. Courtesy is strongly connected with *felaȝschyp*, since it is the virtue that a knight must possess in order to be accepted in a courtly environment. The close relations, which *clannes*

[338] Morgan, 'The Significance of the Pentangle in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"', p. 775.
[339] Hamilton Green, p. 125.
[340] Cherewatuk, p. 140.
[341] Morgan, 'The Significance of the Pentangle in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"', p. 776.
[342] Morgan, 'The Significance of the Pentangle in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"', p. 777.
[343] Morgan, 'The Significance of the Pentangle in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"', p. 777.
[344] Chapter 2.2, p. 80.
[345] Morgan, 'The Significance of the Pentangle in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"', p. 777.

entertains with both *courtaysye* and *felaȝschyp,* are demonstrated by the story of the treacherous liaison between Lancelot and Guinevere. If one posits the chain of loyalty holding together the heroes of the Round Table as based on the same moral virtues intertwined in the pentangle, one might also imagine to what extent a failure of any of the virtues is like the failure of any of the links of the chain. In the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur,* Gawain stresses that Lancelot is too powerful. He has almost become a key stone in the King's company. This parallel emphasises the helplessness of the situation of the Round Table: in a Roman arch, once the key stone is removed, the whole architecture collapses.

> "Well wote we," said Sir Gawain,
> "That we are of the kinges kin,
> And Launcelot is so mikel of main
> That suche wordes were better blinne.
> Well wot thou, brother Agravain,
> Thereof sholde we but harmes win;
> Yet were it better to hele and laine
> Than war and wrake thus to begin." (ll. 1688-95)[346]

These analogies mark another interesting parallel: the removal of one single element from either the pentangle or the Roman arch results in their collapsing. This implosion might imply yet another ambiguity in the nature of the pentangle. Hatt argues that virtues do not turn back on themselves, but rather spread out, as in *The Franklin's Tale,* where the kindness of Arveragus's gesture also influences Aurelius as well as the scholar hired by him[347]. On the contrary, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the virtues of the pentangle are intertwined in such a way as to constitute an enclosed space. This representation perfectly mirrors that of the ill-fated Arthurian court: a close community, self-consuming on the once and future King. However, the virtues of the pentangle can remain securely intertwined only as far as they involve truthfulness. Therefore, Lancelot's adulterous liaison with his king's wife makes him untrue not only to a husband and a friend, but also to his country and thus can be considered an act of treason. In the Middle Ages, a king was believed to possess two bodies: the real body of a man as well as that embodying his own country. An act of

[346] *King Arthur's Death, the Middle English Stanzaic Morte Arthur and Alliterative Morte Arthure*, edited by Larry D. Benson, Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994, pp. 57-8.
[347] Hatt, pp. 197-8.

treason against a king is thus an act of treason against a man as well as against a country[348]. This point is also stressed by Aggravayn in the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur*.

> Well we wote, withouten ween,
> The king Arthur our eme sholde be,
> And Launcelot lies by the queen;
> Again the king traitour is he,
> And that wote all the court bydene,
> And iche day it here and see;
> To the king we sholde it mene,
> Yif ye will do by the counsel of me. (1680-7)[349]

In Arthurian romances, Gawain is certainly not renowned for his cleanness. On the contrary, he is often portrayed as a great warrior, brave and strong, but unfaithful to women. One might argue that since he is described as very young, he might not have achieved this fame yet; however, Lady Bertilak's words are hardly misinterpretable: not only does she mention his reputation as an accomplished lover, but she is also determined to discover whether he deserves this renown. *Pité* is the virtue that completes the pentangle and corresponds to piety, the moral virtue implying the observance of religious duties. Piety is not a theological virtue; consequently, it does not stand for either faith, represented by the wounds of Christ, or hope, represented by the joys of Mary[350]. Piety is the moral virtue of honouring our debt with God not only as a creator, but also as a father[351].

Gawain's truthfulness to all the virtues of the pentangle is tested throughout the poem. Although Gawain, like Solomon, is found partially lacking, his stature is not diminished. Gawain is traditionally described as a great warrior, but his attachment to earthly things has always prevented him from reaching the Graal[352]; therefore, the audience probably expects to find him somehow lacking. By the end of the poem, Gawain should come to terms with his aspiration to perfection being curbed by his human fallibility; consequently, the kind of perfection he can aspire to is only human, whereas divine perfection remains beyond his reach. The lesson in humility Gawain should

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[348] Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies a Study in Mediaeval Political Theology*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957, p. 9.
[349] *King Arthur's Death, the Middle English Stanzaic Morte Arthur and Alliterative Morte Arthure*, edited by Larry D. Benson, Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994, p. 57.
[350] Morgan, 'The Significance of the Pentangle in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"', p. 779
[351] Morgan, 'The Significance of the Pentangle in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"', p. 779.
[352] Benson, p. 103.

learn is that, in spite of his being the embodiment of the virtues of the pentangle as well as part of one of the most renowned companies of knights, he is so by means of God's grace and not by his own merit. Instead of relying on the spiritual Armour of God, Gawain only trusts his material state-of-the-art armour for his protection, as well as the most fashionable clothes he is given at Bertilak's castle[353]. Nonetheless, Gawain is at his best when he is alone or naked, when he is only dressed with the virtues God has provided him with[354]. While wandering the wilderness, Gawain exclusively relies on his faith, since there is no human being who can come to his rescue, whereas, in the temptation scenes, Gawain is lying in bed, undressed of his courtly outfit and only dressed with his virtue, whereby he manages to overcome Lady Bertilak's tests of cleanness.

The conclusion of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is so ambiguous that it makes it hard to determine whether Gawain finally learns the lesson in humility meant by these tests. According to Longo, Gawain finally manages to gain higher intellectual and spiritual understanding[355]. Therefore, his contrition and repentance are to be considered true. However, even though Gawain feels ashamed and openly confesses his sin to his King, the poet does not account for a substantial change in his hero's attitude. As soon as Gawain realises that Lady Bertilak has substantially tricked him, he starts storming against deceiving women. He strongly claims that he should be blamed less, "Þaȝ I be now bigyled, // Me þink me burde be excused" (ll. 2426-7), since if the great heroes of the past failed because of women, he could never stand a chance. The reaction of Arthur's court at Gawain's unexpected return is also hard to define. The court's relief and joy might reveal a profound acknowledgment of human fallibility: since Gawain was tested to the limits of human nature, he did considerably well after all. Nonetheless, the court's reaction can also stem from their immaturity[356]. In order to show their sense of community as well as their pride to count such a great warrior amongst their ranks, Arthur decides that they will all be represented by the green girdle. Arthur's

[353] Hatt, pp. 194-5.
[354] Hatt, p. 195.
[355] Joseph Longo, A., '*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight:* the Christian Quest for Perfection', *Nottingham Mediaeval Studies,* 11 (1967), p. 80.
[356] J.M. Leighton, 'Christian and Pagan Symbolism and Ritual in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"', *Theoria,* 43 (1974), p. 60.

attitude seems to imply that since this community is shaped like a family, the triumph of one of its members is the triumph of all, as much as the failure of one is the failure of all. However, nothing is said about Gawain's own reaction, except that he was honoured for ever after as one can learn from the best romances.

> For þat watz acorded þe renoun of þe Rounde Table,
> And he honoured þat hit hade euermore after,
> As hit is breued in þe best boke of romaunce. (ll. 2520-2)

If other Arthurian romances are to be believed, Gawain became a great warrior, proud and courageous, always ready to risk his life, in order to save a woman in distress. The poem revolves on itself: the narrative is stopped and the author turns his steps backwards, to the mythical war of Troy. Therefore, no new awareness on Gawain's side is accounted for; on the contrary, this final reference to the war of Troy seems to convey the idea that history ultimately repeats itself in the same circular patterns by which kingdoms rise and fall. As a result, the circular time of nature described at the beginning of the second fitt also seems to apply to humankind. Gawain, like Everyman, will continue to fail and sin because it is inherent to his human nature; nonetheless, his courage cannot be disregarded as long as he endeavours to remain faithful to his Christian commitment as knight of God. The narrative of the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur* conversely unfolds in linear time, in which, by the end of the poem, a repented Lancelot retires in a monastery to die almost a saint.

> When the sorrow was to the end,
> The bishop took his habit there
> And welcomed Launcelot as the hende,
> And on his knees down gan he fare:
> "Sir, ye be welcome as our frend,
> Unto this bigging in bankes bare;
> Were it your will with us to lende
> This one night, yif ye may no more!" (ll. 3762-9)[357]

The conclusion is hardly questionable: Lancelot truly repents what he had done and spends his life in expiation and grief.

[357] *King Arthur's Death, the Middle English Stanzaic Morte Arthur and Alliterative Morte Arthure*, edited by Larry D. Benson, Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994, p. 117.

According to Benson, Gawain would not be superior to the Green Knight in any way, except in terms of courtesy[358]. However courtly the Green Knight might try to be, he will never cease to be a churl. Therefore, a distinction between knights and churls can only be drawn on the grounds of courtesy. However, nothing can be inferred about the Green Knight's courage, since his standing still at Gawain's blow is prompted by his certainty that he would survive it. The heroic deeds performed by Bertilak are not in fact deeds of arm, but mere display of hunting prowess. Although Gawain is almost never reported to wield a sword, he shows his bravery by keeping his word. Gawain slightly shakes while waiting for the Green Knight's blow; however, his courage cannot be debased as solely prompted by Gawain's belief in the magical powers of the green girdle. As Gawain remarks, he cannot restore his head on his shoulders, once he has suffered the blow, thus implying that he has grasped the extent of the risk he is undergoing. Therefore, Morgan's claim that Gawain's failure is ultimately a failure of courage[359] might somehow underestimate the bravery of the hero's actions. Gawain seems in fact lacking more faith than courage. In terms of failure of courage, a parallel might be drawn between Gawain's lingering in the bedchamber the whole day and Erec's neglecting his knightly duties to linger in the pleasures of married life[360]. In Chrétien de Troyes's *Erec et Enide,* Enide is tormented by the loss of her husband's reputation. In the eyes of his husband's companions, if one remains at home instead of proving his prowess by knightly deeds he deserves to be marked a coward.

Sire, quand vos si m'angoissiez,
La verité vos en dirai,
Ja plus ne vos celerai ;
Mais je criem mout vos annuit.
Par ceste terre dïent tuit,
Li noir et li blonc et li ros,
Que granz damages est de vos
Que vos armes entrelessiez.
Vostre pris en est abaisiez :
Tuit soloient dire l'autr'an
Qu'en tot le mont ne savoit l'an
Meillor chevalier ne plus preu ;
Vostre parauz n'estoit nul leu.
Or se vont tuit de vos gabant,

[358] Benson, p. 109.
[359] Morgan, 'The Significance of the Pentangle in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"', p. 783.
[360] T. A. Shippey, 'The Uses of Chivalry: "Erec" and "Gawain"', *The Modern Language Review*, 66 (1971), p. 242.

Viel et jone, petit et grant ;
Recreant vos apelent tuit. (ll. 2536-51)[361]

However, one should admit that at the Green Chapel, it is Gawain himself who blames his acting out of cowardice and covetousness. Nonetheless, none of these accusations applies to Gawain's behaviour. He has certainly been no coward, but, exactly like Jonah, he questioned God's plans for him and thought he was not destined to survive this adventure. Therefore, Gawain's despair might have been caused by his lack of faith in God's help. When faith deserts him, he trusts a talisman as the ultimate possibility to save his life. If the pentangle is a token of truth, the green girdle is its opposite: not only a talisman, but also a token of untruth. By retaining the girdle, Gawain deserts the values he has always stood for and thus proves to be untrue both to Bertilak and to God. If the pentangle is to be interpreted exclusively as a symbol of harmony, where the intertwinement of its virtues mirrors the owner's absolute perfection, Gawain is certainly found undeserving of it. Nonetheless, his only fault, instead of diminishing his prowess, celebrates Gawain's immense courage and prompts the audience to admire him as the great knight they know he is destined to become. Gawain's frailties allow him to transcend the boundaries of time and raise him to the rank of the greatest.

According to Frye, in high mimetic mode, in spite of being subject to both social criticism and the order of nature, the hero is a leader, with passions and authority far greater than common people's[362]. Therefore, in Gawain's description, we can truly perceive a shift from romantic to mimetic fiction, since Gawain not only inspires admiration, but also proves to deserve the pentangle, in so far as it is not considered a symbol of absolute perfection, but rather the symbol of Gawain's excellence amongst the best knights, a leader that men would follow. He might not have

[361] Chrétien de Troyes, *Erec et Enide,* edited and translated by Jean-Marie Fritz, Paris : Librairie générale française, 1992, pp. 208-10. "Sire, she said, since you press me so, // I will tell you what truth I know; // I speak with sorrow and with dread. // In this whole country it is said // by all – the fair, the dark, the red – // what shame it is that since you've wed, // you neglect arms and exploits. Oh, // how your great worth has fallen low! // It was long custom, in the speech // of knights together, each to each, // to say none like you could found, // better and braver, more renowned, // in the whole world. Now they laugh, all – // young folk and white-haired, short and tall, // they call you passé, cowardly!" (ll. 2539-53), Chrétien de Troyes, *Erec and Enide* translated by Dorothy Gilbert, Oxford: University of California Press, 1992, pp. 118-9.
[362] Frye, p. 34.

entirely lived up to the expectations set by the pentangle, but he certainly deserves, as Chrétien de Troyes remarks in *Yvain ou le Chevalier au Lion*, to be praised as the very embodiment of chivalry, the man who makes it illustrious.

> Entre la lune et le soloil.
> […]
> Que de lui est tot autresi
> Chevalerie enluminee,[363] (ll. 2402-7)

3.2 The bewildering greenness of the Green Knight

Many scholars have attempted to uncover the inner nature of the Green Knight by relying upon the symbolism linked to his green complexion and clothes. An overview of some of these theories might demonstrate to what extent the Green Knight's nature proves to be resistant to any definitive classification. According to Pastoureau, in Arthurian romance tradition, a green knight is a young knight eager to prove his courage by setting off on an adventure[364]. However, in the same tradition, green is also reported to have ambiguous associations with magic, since Merlin is repeatedly described as dressed in green[365]. This parallel with Merlin might not only reinforce the connection between this poem and pre-Christian popular folklore, but also further a possible identification of the Green Knight with the wizard. Long's identification of the Green Knight with Merlin is grounded in their many similarities: both of them live in caves, are shapeshifters and entertain some relationships with Morgan Le Fay[366]. However, identifying the Green Knight with Merlin might be weakened by the significant age difference between the two. Long confutes this view by pointing out that Bertilak is also described once in the poem as *olde,* "þe olde lorde of þat leude"[367]. It might be worth emphasising that since both Merlin and Bertilak / the Green Knight are shapeshifters, technically they can transform into whatever creature of whatever age they desire to. Long uses the

[363] "Between the moon and the sun […] for by him knighthood is // made illustrious" Chrétien de Troyes, *The Knight with the Lion, or Yvain (Le Chevalier au Lion),* edited and translated by William W. Kibler, New York: Garland Library of Middle English Literature, 1985, pp. 98-9.
[364] Michel Pastoureau, *Verde, Storia di un Colore*, translated by Guido Calza, Milano: Ponte alle Grazie, 2013, p. 103.
[365] Pastoureau, p. 103.
[366] Charles Long, "Was the Green Knight Really Merlin?", *Interpretations*, 7 (1975), p. 1.
[367] Long, p. 1.

Green Knight's words at the Green Chapel as further evidence for this identification: the knight claims that in this land he is called Bertilak Hautdesert, "Bertilak de Hautdesert I hat in þis londe" (l. 2445), thus possibly implying that somewhere else he is called otherwise[368]. Furthermore, Merlin and the Green Knight simultaneously maintain close relationships with both the courtly and the natural environment. Merlin's appearance is that of a woodman, but he serves King Uther and he is involved in his treacherous plans to seduce Igraine, whereas the Green Knight's appearance is entirely that of a courtier, except for his uncanny green hue, but his dwelling place is typical of a woodman. However, although the points listed are unquestionable, they can hardly provide solid evidence to demonstrate a straightforward identification of the Green Knight with Merlin. Instead, they might only be used to emphasise to what extent this poem is rooted in Arthurian romance tradition. As stressed by the Green Knight himself at the Green Chapel, Morgan Le Fay was instructed in magic arts by Merlin, for she engaged in an intimate relationship with him.

> Þurȝ myȝt of Morgne la Faye, þat in my hous lenges,
> And koyntyse of clergye, bi craftes wel lerned –
> Þe maystrés of Merlyn mony hatz taken
> For ho hatz dalt drwry ful dere sumtyme
> With þat conable klerk; þat knowes alle your knyȝtez
> At hame. (ll. 2446-51)

The well-known story to which the Green Knight is referring is that culminating in Merlin's eternal imprisonment in the forest of Brocéliande. Therefore, it might be difficult to find any valid reasons for Morgan to free Merlin solely to test Arthur's court.

Pastoureau also draws a parallel between green and the representation of Lady Fortune in Christine de Pizane's *Livre de la Mutation de la Fortune*[369]. After a conventional reference to the inconstancy of fortune, Christine de Pizane describes Lady Fortune's brothers, Eur and Maleur. The former, representing chance, is dressed in green, "moult voulentiers se vest de vert"[370], whereas the latter, representing sadness, is dressed in black, "Le drap est de noire coulour // en seigne de toute

[368] Long, p. 2.
[369] Pastoureau, p. 105
[370] "He likes very much to wear green clothes"(my translation), Christine de Pizan, *Le Livre de la Mutation de la Fortune,* folio 40v, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b84514805/f92.image [accessed on 19/03/2020]

doulour"[371]. Consequently, green could also be interpreted as the colour representing one of Lady Fortune's brothers, Eur, or even Destiny, since by accepting the Green Knight's challenge Gawain puts his reputation, as well as his life, in the hands of Fortune. Although it might be impossible to provide unequivocal evidence to support this interpretation, it is worth emphasising that before the last temptation scene, the poet makes an interesting use of both the Old English word *wyrde* and the Old French word *destiné*, "how þat Destiné schulde þat day dele hym his wyrde" (l. 1752). According to the *Middle English Dictionary*, *wyrde* was the Old English word used to describe the ineluctable fate to which even the gods were subjected, whereas *Destiné* could be a synonym of *wyrde,* as well as of Divine Providence. Therefore, the word *wyrde* might emphasise the helplessness of Gawain's situation, since it represents a fate inescapable by definition. Furthermore, since the Destiny that will deal out Gawain's fate is in fact the Green Knight, the use of the word *Destiné* as a synonym for Divine Providence might open up yet another possible interpretation of the Green Knight's nature.

According to Randall, in the Middle Ages, green was associated with life, rebirth, but also faithfulness and chastity, whereas, in Britain, it was also associated with the otherworld[372]. Therefore, green was connected to the world of fairies, as well as to that of the dead[373]. In this respect, the Green Knight certainly retains some features that might allow his identification with death itself. For instance, when Gawain asks the Green Knight to provide him with some directions in order to find the Green Chapel, he tersely replies that no further indication is needed, since it is impossible to miss the Green Chapel, "Forþi me for to fynde if þou fraystez, faylez þou neuer" (l. 455). The only thing one cannot fail to find is death. Nonetheless, this association seems less convincing if one takes into account that the Green Knight is not wielding a scythe, conventionally associated with death, but rather an axe.

[371] "He is dressed in black as a sign of grief"(my translation), Christine de Pizan, *Le Livre de la Mutation de la Fortune,* folio 42v https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b84514805/f96.image [accessed on 19/03/2020]
[372] Dale B. J. Randall, 'Was the Green Knight a Fiend?', *Studies in Philology,* 57 (1960), p. 479.
[373] Benson, p. 91.

Green was also associated with the devil[374]. For instance, in Chaucer's *The Friar's Tale,* a Summoner, on his way to extort money from a poor widow, encounters a yeoman dressed entirely in green.

> And happed that he saugh bifore hym ryde
> A gay yeman, under a forest syde.
> A bowe he bar, and arwes brighte and kene;
> He hadde upon a courtepy of grene,
> An hat upon his heed with frenges blake. (ll. 1379-83)

The yeoman declares that he comes from the North "fer in the north contree" (l. 1413) and that it is impossible for the Summoner to fail to find his house, "I shal thee so wel wise // That of myn hous ne shaltow nevere mysse" (ll. 1415-6). The yeoman nonchalantly reveals that he is a fiend dwelling in hell, "I am a feend; my dwellyng is in helle" (l. 1448). The analogies between Chaucer's yeoman and the Green Knight are certainly numerous: the Green Chapel is northward as compared to Camelot, the Green Knight not only is dressed in green, but also has a green complexion, and he sarcastically declares that Gawain cannot fail to find him. In the Middle Ages, the devil was also described as a hunter; consequently, Chaucer's audience could infer the very nature of the yeoman well before he openly discloses it[375]. On the contrary, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* the identification of the Green Knight with the devil is all but straightforward. According to Randall, the Gawain-poet might have wanted to augment the sense of abhorrence and shock that the Green Knight's appearance caused the court by also making his complexion green. The poet might also have wanted to reinforce the idea that the Green Knight is a fiend by describing him as a hunter. However, this hypothesis seems less convincing when one takes into account that the Green Knight's appearance is certainly threatening but it is also that of a courtier. Furthermore, the Green Knight's alter ego, Sir Bertilak, cannot be defined as a hunter by profession, but rather someone who hunts in his leisure. Nonetheless, according to Randall, these are only minor differences, which contribute to reinforcing the Green Knight's identification with the devil instead of hindering it[376].

[374] Randall, p. 481.
[375] Randall, p. 481.
[376] Randall, p. 482.

Randall also comments on Morgan Le Fay's appearance, by emphasising that her sallow complexion as well as her wrinkled face would point to a devilish creature, since yellow was the colour of deception and her black chin was a symbol of witchcraft[377]. Therefore, according to Randall, the audience would immediately have identified the Green Knight with a fiend and his benevolent behaviour at the Green Chapel would be justified by the medieval conviction that fiends were able to do a certain amount of good as well[378]. In this view, Lady Bertilak might also be considered a devilish creature, re-enacting the trope of the beautiful woman tempting the virtuous man[379]. This is certainly not the viewpoint of Gawain, who conversely interprets her advances as a conventional part of the game of love. His pride blinds him to such an extent that he never doubts the sincerity of Lady Bertilak's intentions.

As mentioned before, in order to reach the Green Chapel Gawain rides northwards. North was considered the place where not only the Christian, but also the Norse hell was placed[380]. The poet's reference to the North might well be interpreted as a reference to Hell, as many scholars, such as Randall, have done, but in the logic of a realistic description of the Wirral, it might also point to the real position of this area as compared to Camelot, which was conventionally placed either in Winchester or in Tintagel. Therefore, the reference might be both real and symbolic; it is up to the audience to choose whether this detail can be used to infer the very nature of the intruder or not. Further elements might have a twofold interpretation. For instance, Randall points out that the Green Chapel is placed near a stream, which he recognises as a threshold to another world, like the river Acheron in Dante's *Inferno* III.70-120[381]. Longo conversely states that the same stream might symbolise purification and thus connects the Green Chapel with Gawain's new awareness[382]. The entrance of the Green Chapel is disturbingly similar to the mouth of hell or at least to the entrance

[377] Randall, p. 486.
[378] Randall, p. 485.
[379] Randall, p. 484.
[380] Randall, p. 487.
[381] Randall, p. 490.
[382] Longo, p. 83.

to another world[383], like the "roche" (l. 349) through which Orfeo enters the realm of the Fairy King in order to rescue his wife in the lay *Sir Orfeo*.

However, Randall's identification of the Green Knight with a fiend might be less convincing if one takes into account, as stressed by Leighton, that all the characters hear Mass during Gawain's stay at Bertilak's castle[384]. Therefore, Leighton suggests that not only the Green Knight as well as Lady Bertilak and Morgan Le Fay can hardly be perceived as fiends, but also that it is necessary to find a positive Christian connotation of the colour green. He argues that green is the colour of the vestment the priests wear at Epiphany and means faith, goodness, and immortality[385]. The Epiphany is also a time for revelation and thus fits the interpretation of Gawain's finally reaching a new self-awareness[386]. Longo adds that Gawain's epiphany might also consist in the recognition of faith, hope, and charity, which correspond to the orthodox penitential triad: contrition, confession, satisfaction[387]. In this light, Gawain's adventure might also be perceived as a journey of initiation, customarily beginning with the phase of separation, followed by initiation, and ending with rebirth[388]. Gawain's rebirth might consist in his new awareness of human frailties[389]. Furthermore, the Green Knight's clothes are embroidered with threads made of gold, which, according to Leighton, is a symbol of faith, constancy, and wisdom[390]. Consequently, Leighton clearly interprets the Green Knight not as fiend, but rather as a benevolent figure. However, instead of the gold symbolism providing final evidence to further Leighton's theory, it might in fact cast yet another shadow of ambiguity on the Green Knight's nature, since, as stressed by Longo, the gold decorating the Green Knight's clothes and axe could reveal his devilish identity by representing greed[391].

[383] Randall, p. 489.
[384] Leighton, p. 53.
[385] Leighton, p. 56.
[386] Leighton, p. 56.
[387] Longo, p. 72. This theme will be further explored in the next chapter.
[388] Longo, p. 72.
[389] Longo, p. 74.
[390] Leighton, p. 56.
[391] Longo, p. 83.

Longo conversely hypothesises that the interpretation of the Green Knight undergoes a significant change throughout the poem: he represents a cruel fiend at the beginning, whereas by the end, he also shows a benevolent attitude[392]. Longo's argument is based on the conviction that God draws good out of evil[393]; therefore, Gawain's failure might be considered some sort of *felix culpa*, since it allows Gawain to gain greater self-awareness and humility. The battle-axe thus becomes the axe of justice[394], the means whereby the Green Knight finally teaches Gawain a lesson in humility. Longo also adds that green might equally represent hope[395]. This view is supported by the interpretation of Christmas time as the symbol of the birth of a new religion[396]. Longo grounds his hypothesis on the medieval practice of having bilateral interpretations depending on the context[397]. Therefore, what has just been mentioned for the colour green can potentially apply to any other colour. For instance, in the lay *Sir Orfeo* white is associated with the fairy world instead of being associated with purity. Similarly, the gold of Gawain's pentangle should be interpreted *in bono* (as righteousness), whereas the gold of the Green Knight's clothes and axe should be interpreted *in malo* (as greed)[398]. As Longo points out by quoting Saint Augustine's *De Civitate Dei*, God's creation should be interpreted as a constant opposition of contraries[399].

> Sicut ergo ista contraria contrariis opposita sermonis pulchritudinem reddunt: ita quadam non verborum, sed rerum eloquentia contrariorum oppositione saeculi pulchritudo componitur. Apertissime hoc positum est in libro ecclesiastico isto modo: Contra malum bonum est et contra mortem vita; sic contra pium peccator. Et sic intuere in omnia opera Altissimi, bina bina, unum contra unum. (XI, 18) [400]

In order to further his point, namely that the Green Knight is also a fiend, Longo stresses how Gawain's guide instructs him to take his left in order to reach the Green Chapel. Left can be

[392] Longo, p. 83.
[393] Longo, p. 74.
[394] Longo, p. 84.
[395] Longo, p. 82.
[396] Longo, p. 58.
[397] Longo, p. 60.
[398] Longo, p. 83.
[399] Longo, p. 60.
[400] Sancti Aurelii Augustini Episcopi, *De Civitate Dei,* edited by Bernhard Dombart, Lipsiae: B. G. Teubneri, 1877, p. 486. "As, then, these oppositions of contraries lend beauty to the language, so the beauty of the course of this world is achieved by the opposition of contraries, arranged, as it were, by an eloquence not of words, but of things. This is quite plainly stated in the book of Ecclesiasticus, in this way: 'Good is set against evil, and life against death: so is the sinner against the godly. So look upon all the works of the Most High, and these are two and two, one against another.'" Saint Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God,* translated by Marcus Dods, Peabody: Hendrickson, 2009, p. 325.

considered yet another reference to hell[401]; nonetheless, it can also be interpreted physically, as a site, well known to the audience, located westwards as compared to Bertilak's castle. Many scholars have in fact identified this place with Ludchurch, a deep chasm in the rock, conveniently mysterious for the purpose of the poem[402].

Other scholars, such as Bachman, conversely identify the Green Knight as a combination of green man and wild man[403]. The Green Knight would be simultaneously characterised by the desire of death typical of the wild man, as well as the impulse to life, typical of the green man. This view might lead to interpreting the Green Knight as a symbol of the wilderness trespassing on the courtly environment. However convincing this hypothesis might seem at first sight, one should also take into account that the Green Knight is also described as a knight, the very product of a refined courtly environment. Furthermore, although he certainly is a supernatural creature conjured by Morgan Le Fay, he is also described as a real man. The poet never provides any physical details about Sir Gawain, who is in fact only abstraction[404]. The audience can only rely upon the description of Gawain provided by other romances, since, in this poem, his appearance is neglected and only his armour is depicted. As stressed in the previous chapter, Gawain's behaviour will thus be measured in terms of the absolute perfection set by the pentangle. On the contrary, the poet provides several details about the Green Knight's physical appearance, such as his hair, beard, as well as his gigantic stature. The description of the Green Knight's sturdiness matches that of Bertilak's in terms of liveliness. As a result, these contrasting descriptions lead to a paradox: a supernatural creature, the product of magic, has more vitality than a flesh-and-blood knight. However, the Green Knight seems to escape definite identifications as much as he seems to embrace them all. His identity is built upon dichotomy: he is simultaneously a courtier and a villain, life and death, war and peace, supernatural and human.

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[401] Longo, p.62.
[402] Turville-Petre, p. 51.
[403] W. Bryant Bachman, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: The Green and the Gold Once More." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 23 (1981), p. 496.
[404] Bachman, p. 498.

However, these contrasting views might allow the audience to uncover not only the Green Knight's true nature, but also another central theme in this poem: namely that of choice. For instance, Arthur chooses to interpret the Green Knight's message as war, even though he has been given the possibility to interpret it otherwise. Gawain makes a choice as well: he prefers to accept and retain the girdle so that his fame remains unaltered. Dante also delineates the distinction between nature and reason on the grounds of choices. Therefore, the activity that allows human beings to distinguish is a moral activity, the product of their free will, their continuously being faced with choices[405].

> Sono anche operazioni che la nostra [ragione] considera ne l'atto de la volontade […] e queste del tutto soggiacciono a la nostra volontade; e però semi detti da loro buoni e rei perch'elle sono proprie nostre del tutto, perché, quando la nostra volontade ottenere puote, tanto le nostre operazioni di stendono. (IV.IX.7)[406]

As for the Green Knight, the poet might have wanted to play on the double symbolism of the colour green in order to let Arthur's court as well as Gawain (and the audience with them) decide whether to interpret him as a devilish creature or otherwise. Gawain evidently chooses to interpret him as a devilish foe, since, on his way to the Green Chapel, he comments:

> "We! Lorde," quoþ þe gentyle knyȝt,
> "Wheþer þis be þe Grene Chapelle?
> Here myȝt aboute mydnyȝt
> Þe dele his matynnes telle!" (ll. 2185-8)

Gawain's interpreting the Green Knight as a fiend triggers consequent action. The author also emphasises Gawain's being faced with a choice to make, by exhorting him, at the end of the first fitt, to think carefully as this adventure will put him to the test.

> Now þenk wel, Sir Gawan,
> For woþe þat þou ne wonde
> Þis auenture for to frayn
> Þat þou hatz tan on honde. (ll. 487-90)

[405] Morgan, 'The Significance of the Pentangle in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"', p. 774.
[406] Dante Alighieri, *Convivio*, Milano: Einaudi, 1988, p. 154. "There are also operations which our reason considers as they exist in the act of will […] and these are entirely subject to our will, and therefore we are considered good or bad on their account, because they are properly ours in their entirety; for, as far as our will can have its way, so far do operations that are really ours extend." Dante Alighieri, *The Convivio of Dante Alighieri*, translated by Philip H. Wicksteed, London: J.M. Dent, 1903, p. 270.

In order to overcome the tests he will face, Gawain will need to decipher the meaning of the Green Knight's threats, as well as his appearance. Gawain seems almost certain he has grasped the meaning of both. He immediately interprets the outcome of the beheading game as his inescapable death sentence.

> "Quat schuld I wonde?
> Of Destinés derf and dere
> What may mon do bot fonde?" (ll.563-5)

He also has no doubt on the nature of the Green Knight: he is a fiend and the Green Chapel stands for a threshold to hell.

> "Wheþer þis be þe Grene Chapelle?
> Here myȝt aboute mydnyȝt
> Þe dele his matynnes telle!" (ll. 2186-8)

Therefore, not only is Gawain certain that his adventure is ill fated from the start, but he also proves incapable of deciphering the clues that make the Green Knight an enemy completely different from standard Arthurian villains.

The Green Knight's appearance as well as his profuse use of legal language betray an identity far more closely connected to the courtly environment than that of standard romance villains. In the Middle Ages, law was considered the earthly representation of God's rules; therefore, it held centre stage in people's lives[407]. It took the form of Church doctrine and rules of Christian conduct, as well as the form of the chivalric code[408]. Verbal agreements such as that between the Green Knight and Gawain were considered some sort of express contracts, where the conditions of the agreement should specifically have been articulated in the contract's construction[409]. As a result, in these lines the Gawain-poet evokes both the form and the vocabulary of medieval contracts, such as the year-and-a-day time, which not only represents almost a cliché in fairy tales, but also suggests a particular day in court for a pleader[410]. The battle-axe might also be considered a reward associated

[407] Robert J. Blanch, Julian N. Wasserman, 'Medieval Contracts and Covenants: the Legal Coloring of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight', Neophilologus,* 68 (1984), p. 598.
[408] Blanch, Wasserman, p. 599.
[409] Blanch, Wasserman, p. 599.
[410] Blanch, Wasserman, p. 601.

with participating in the exchange of blows[411]. Arthur's accepting the axe and passing it to Gawain outlines yet another aspect of medieval contracts: the King's presence functions as a guarantee that the sealed pact will be respected. Furthermore, Gawain formally states his name as requested by the Green Knight in order for the agreement to be sealed. A similar use of legal language can also be retrieved in Bertilak's setting the terms of the agreement conventionally called the "Exchange of Gifts". This might be considered yet another element that allows the audience to identify Bertilak with the Green Knight. However, Bertilak's use of the word "cheuicaunce" (l. 1390), a mercantile term used to indicate gains in business[412], might also reveal his provincial attitude, an aspect that might not have escaped Gawain's attention. Gawain might have felt somehow superior to his host, so much so that he never even asks him his name, thus implying that it is of little importance to him. The exchange of names is of great importance in romances. For instance, in Chrétien de Troyes's *Perceval*, Perceval is told by his mother that he should never remain in a knight's company without knowing his name, since by the name one knows the man.

> Ja an chemin ne an ostel
> N'aiez longuement conpaignon
> Que vos ne demandez son nom ;
> Le non sachiez a la parsome,
> car par le nom conuist an l'ome (ll. 540-4)[413]

Had Gawain asked his host's name, he would certainly notice that Bertilak's surname, *Hautdesert,* literally wasteland, could hardly arouse a feeling of confidence.

The Green Knight's recourse to legal language and forms does not guarantee his virtue, but rather serves as yet another reference to *trawþe,* since every legal contract is bound to the faithfulness of the parties. In *The Canterbury Tales,* Chaucer explores both sides of the recourse to legal language and forms. In *The Friar's Tale*, for instance, the instrument of God's justice, namely the Summoner, is depicted as corrupted and debased, only moved by his self-interest. On the

[411] Blanch, Wasserman, p. 601.
[412] Blanch, Wasserman, p. 603.
[413] "Never keep company with anyone for very long, // whether at an inn or on the road, // without asking his name; // learn his name well, // for by the name one knows the man." Chrétien de Troyes, *The Story of the Grail (Li contes del Graal), or Perceval*, edited by Rupert T. Pickens, translated by William W. Kibler, New York: Garland Library of Middle English Literature, 1990, pp. 28-9.

contrary, in *The Franklin's Tale,* all characters stipulate different covenants binding them to their faithfulness, whose importance is emphasised by Arveragus's words: "Trouthe is the hyeste thing that man may kepe" (l. 1478). Although Arveragus is well aware that his wife's keeping her word would result in her betraying him, he does not hesitate and prompts her to do so, "as myn housbond bad, // My trouthe for to holde" (ll. 1512-3), since, in his eyes, *trouthe* is the highest virtue, that encompassing all the others. It is unclear whether Chaucer ironically wanted to depict the extreme limits to which chivalric values can be pushed; nonetheless, the stature of Arveragus's gesture is not diminished.

The guide who takes Gawain to the Green Chapel also confirms Gawain's concerns about the identity of the Green Knight. According to the guide, the Green Knight is a fierce oppressor, quite similar to any other romance villain. However, if Bertilak's account is to be believed, Morgan Le Fay transformed him into the Green Knight only for this occasion[414].

> "Ho wayned me vpon þis wyse to your wynne halle
> For to assay þe surquidré, ȝif hit soth were
> Þat rennes of þe grete renoun of þe Rounde Table;" (ll. 2456-8)

Therefore, if on the one hand, the guide's words might be considered an additional test of Gawain's courage; on the other, they only serve to meet romance expectations. Gawain's refusal comes in no way unexpected; it is exactly what a romance hero would say in similar circumstances.

> "Grant merci", quoþ Gawayn, and gruchyng he sayde:
> "Wel worth þe, wyȝe, þat woldez my gode,
> And þat lelly me layne I leue wel þou woldez;
> Bot helde þou hit neuer so holde, and I here passed,
> Founded for ferde for to fle, in fourme þat þou tellez,
> I were a knyȝt kowarde, I myȝt not be excused.
> Bot I wyl to þe chapel, for chaunce þat may falle,
> And talk wyth þat ilk tulk þe tale þat me lyste,
> Worþe hit wele oþer wo, as þe wyrde lykez
> Hit hafe.
> Þaȝe he be a sturn knape
> To stiȝtel, and stad with staue,
> Ful wel con Dryȝtyn schape
> His seruauntez for to saue." (ll. 2126-39)

This passage can be considered an opportunity for Gawain's courage to be acknowledged and praised. He has failed to meet not only the audience's but also his own expectations throughout the

[414] Hatt, p. 192.

poem and yet, all of a sudden, he has the chance to embody the main character of one of his favourite stories. He is now faced with the opportunity to demonstrate that he really is an Arthurian knight on quest. Gawain's final statement emphasises to what extent he is now playing his part. In spite of being fully aware of wearing the green girdle, he declares that if God's wish is to spare his life, no villain can harm him. This is precisely the logic of ordeals that Gawain has proved not to trust by retaining Lady Bertilak's talisman.

Randall emphatically states that "Gawain himself realizes that he has, symbolically speaking, travelled too far to the North"[415]. This statement might evoke the sin of pride described in Dante's *Inferno* XXVI, where Ulysses prompts his companions to follow him in the desperate attempt to overstep the limits of human nature in order to achieve higher knowledge.

> Fatti non foste a viver come bruti
> Ma per seguire virtute e canoscenza (ll. 119-20)[416]

On the contrary, Gawain's travel is independent of his will; he is forced to cross the wilderness of the Wirral in order to keep his word. His pride does not consist in his desire to achieve higher knowledge, but rather in that his quest is aimed at achieving spiritual perfection. However, God's creation is not God and thus it is inherently imperfect and sinful. Nonetheless, since humankind is a creation of God, it is also inherently good and thus people's souls are constantly struggling between good and evil[417]. The source of any perversion is pride; therefore, it is the sin that any Christian should beware the most. However, if the Green Knight should function as the evil principle behind the story and Arthur as his opposite, he should somehow embody the sin of pride. On the contrary, the court never accuses the Green Knight of pride, but rather Arthur.

> Hadet wyth an aluisch mon, for angardez pryde.
> Who knew euer any kyng such counsel to take
> As knyȝtez in cauelaciounz on Crystmasse gomnez? (ll. 681-3)

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[415] Randall, p. 491.
[416] Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia,* edited by Umberto Bosco and Giovanni Reggio, *Milano*: Le Monnier, 1994. "Ye were not born to live like brutish herd,
But righteousness and wisdom to ensue", Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri,The Inferno*, translated by James Romanes Sibbald, Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1884, p. 198.
[417] Longo, p. 58.

One might also wonder whether the supernatural appearance of the Green Knight still allows the defining of this poem as mimetic fiction. According to Frye, in high mimetic fiction, the characters are subjected to the laws of nature; nonetheless, some supernatural visitations, such as ghosts, are admitted, as the plane of experience is in a way upon reality[418]. In romances, ghosts are not uncommon and are perceived as mere additional characters by no means more marvellous than many other elements. For instance, in the anonymous fifteenth-century romance *The Awntyrs off Arthur,* a ghost is vividly described. While Arthur is riding with his companions towards the hunting stations in Inglewood Forest, Guenevere and Gawain remain behind and see a ghost emerging from the lake Tarn Wadlingin. Although the apparition is made ominous by the reference to Lucifer "In the lyknes of Lucyfere" (l. 84), as well as by the previous eclipsing of the Sun, "hit ar the clippes of the son, I herd a clerk say" (l. 94), it is still defined as a marvel, "now wol I of this mervaile mele, if I mote" (l. 74), thus making the ghost a character not so different from giants, dragons and *wodwos*.

> Bare was the body and blak to the bone,
> Al biclagged in clay uncomly cladde.
> Hit waried, hit wayment as a woman,
> But on hide ne on huwe no heling hit hadde.
> Hit stemered, hit stonayde, hit stode as a stone,
> Hit marred, hit memered, hit mused for madde.
> […]
> On the chef of the cholle,
> A pade pikes on the polle,
> With eighen holked ful holle
> That gloed as the gledes.
> Al glowed as a glede the goste there ho glides,
> Umbeclipped in a cloude of clethyng unclere,
> Serkeled with serpentes all aboute the sides -
> To tell the todes theron my tonge wer full tere. (ll. 105-21)[419]

A parallel might be drawn between this poem and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* since the ghost's apparition, as the Green Knight's, almost scares Guinevere to death, "I gloppen and I grete!" (l. 91). The macabre effect provoked by the ghost is emphasised by the contrast between its once beautiful appearance and its present dreadful one. The ghost turns out to be Guinevere's

[418] Frye, p. 50.
[419] *The Awntyrs Off Arthur,* edited by Thomas Hahn, https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/hahn-sir-gawain-awntyrs-off-arthur [accessed on 20/03/2020]

mother who warns her daughter against lust and foretells Gawain the downfall of Arthur's reign. Interestingly enough, the spectre accuses Arthur of covetousness, since the King tries to take advantage of Lady Fortune's gifts regardless of their inherent transiency. However, both Gawain and the Queen seem to accept this macabre marvel as if it were something not so different from the prophetic dreams populating both the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* and the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur*. On the contrary, in high mimetic fiction, ghosts clearly come from another world[420] and appear uncanny, awful and mysterious, capable of eliciting feelings of terror and disorientation in the audience. However, if on the one hand, the presence of the Green Knight does not prevent the classification of this poem as mimetic fiction, on the other, it provides insufficient evidence to confirm it, since supernatural creatures are also standard material for romances. The substantial shift towards mimetic fiction might conversely be retrieved in Gawain's sinfulness. According to John Burrow, "the sinfulness of men is the chief source of medieval literary realism"[421]. Consequently, Gawain's sinfulness allows his identification with Everyman[422], with all his frailties and doubts, with no higher knowledge than anyone else. His experience should have served as an example for the whole community[423]; however, the reaction of Arthur's court seems to highlight little understanding of the extent of Gawain's experience. The cyclic nature of the poem emphasises that Arthur's court has waited unchanged for their champion's return. Even when Gawain discloses his failure, they appear incapable of drawing lessons from Gawain's adventure. The static nature of Arthur's court as well as the realistic sinfulness of Gawain allow the poet to have two kinds of fiction simultaneously: romantic and mimetic. Arthur's court might be considered the element that is most rooted in the romance, more than the giants, dragons, and *wodwos* Gawain encounters in the wilderness, which are conversely only given marginal importance in this poem. Even though Gawain appears securely bound to the romance tradition, he is also projected into a new dimension, more dynamic, certainly more insidious, and thus more real.

[420] Frye, p. 50.
[421] Burrow, *A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* p. 171.
[422] Longo, p. 85.
[423] Leighton, p. 61.

4. The late medieval debate on the sacrament of penance.

In the early Middle Ages, confessions were public events whereby sinners were reconciled with both the Church and their community[424]. Public confessions, also called Canonical Penance, were admitted only once in a lifetime and punishments were usually severe. A real shift towards private confession is marked by the ninth-century *Burgundian Penitential,* which can also be considered one of the first manuals for confessors. Since confessors were required to make their way through the increasingly complex theoretical framework of penance, they needed practical guidelines in order to train. This pressing need gave birth to a new penitential genre, called *Summa Confessorum*. The papal bull *Omnis Utriusque Sexus* issued in 1215 by Innocent III proclaimed that every Christian should confess at least once a year to the parson of their village. This annual confession usually took place in Lent, typically on Maundy Thursday. Furthermore, the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were both characterised by laity's growing thirst for spirituality, which found its expression not only in the religious movement of the Lollards, but also in the flowering of mysticism. Lay people were also assiduously taught how to analyse their moral behaviour by priests' sermons, by manuals such as the *Pricke of Conscience*, and by the practice of confession[425].

The late Middle Ages was also characterised by fierce disputes between parochial clergy and friars over the right to administer the sacrament of penance[426]. Although in 1281 the papal bull *Ad Fructus Uberes* issued by Martin IV gave further concessions to the friars in terms of their right to confess without episcopal licence[427], the debate must still have been open by the end of the fourteenth century. For instance, the Friar depicted by Chaucer in his *General Prologue* has the licensed right to hear confessions from parishioners and absolve them of their sins.

> For he hadde power of confessioun,

[424] My information on medieval confession in this paragraph is taken from Anthony Low, 'Privacy, Community, and Society: Confession as a Cultural Indicator in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *Religion & Literature,* 30 (1998), pp. 1-20.
[425] John Burrow, 'The Two Confession Scenes in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"', *Modern Philology,* 57 (1959), p. 79.
[426] Low, p. 5.
[427] Low, p. 7.

As seyde himself, more than a curat,
For of his ordre he was licentiate.
And plesaunt was his absolucioun
He was an esy man to yeve penaunce
Ther as he wiste to have a good pitaunce. (ll. 218-24)

Chaucer also emphasises how disputes over penance were not only at a theoretical level, but also at a very practical one: his Friar, a "worthy limitour", unreservedly grants absolution only when something can be obtained in return. Although by the fourteenth century confessions had mainly transformed into private encounters between parsons and parishioners, privacy could not always be respected due to material circumstances – the confessional booth was introduced only in the sixteenth century[428]. Since confessions were sometimes transformed into almost public events, they could somehow affect public life[429]. Consequently, it comes as no surprise that in the fourteenth century two distinct approaches to the matter of confession still coexisted in England: the private approach, consisting in an intimate disclosure of one's sins to a member of the clergy, as well as the public one, consisting in parish confessions made in front of the congregation[430]. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, both the private and the public spheres of confession are given prominent place: the confession scenes taking place first before a priest and then before the Green Knight involve the private sphere, whereas Gawain's public confession before King Arthur's court involves the public one.

Scholastic theologians distinguished three phases – also called the penitential triad – in the sacrament of penance: contrition, confession, and satisfaction. The Middle Ages was characterised by a debate on the necessity of all three phases in order to deserve remission. In particular, theologians were questioning whether contrition of the heart was sufficient to receive the remission of sins or if the confession to a priest was also required. The twelfth-century jurist Gratian, in his treatise *De Penitentia,* by means of a dialectic method analyses theologians' different positions on

[428] Low, p. 5.
[429] Low, p. 3.
[430] Low, pp. 8-9.

the compulsoriness of outward confession in order to obtain the cleansing of sins[431]. Those supporting the hypothesis that outward confession was not compulsory in order to be cleansed of one's sins ground their claim on St Peter's being forgiven for having denied Jesus only through his contrite tears. No confession or satisfaction is reported in the Scriptures[432]. The detractors of this theory conversely claim that contrition of the heart can be accepted only if penitents are in no condition to confess their sins to a priest before death[433]. Although Gratian appears to side with neither theory on this matter, he never questions people's actual confessing to priests. On the contrary, he assumes that each and every Christian should and do confess at least once a year[434]. Nonetheless, the necessity of contrition is unquestionable: in order to obtain God's forgiveness, true repentance is mandatory.

Therefore, since the root of a valid confession is contrition, it should come as no surprise that many speculations have arisen around the validity of Gawain's confession[435]. According to Chaucer's Parson in *The Parson's Tale,* penitence is "the pleynynge of man for the gilt that he hath doon, and namoore to do any thyng for which hym oghte to pleyne" (l. 83). Therefore, the whole architecture of contrition is based on two pillars: the first is true repentance for what one did; the other is true desire not to commit the same sin again. If one of these conditions does not apply, the entire structure collapses and the validity of confession is unquestionably compromised. Chaucer's Parson also adds that if one does not cease to behave sinfully, contrition is empty, since "wepynge, and nat for to stynte to do synne, may nat avayle" (l. 90). This point is used by John Burrow[436] in order to demonstrate that Gawain's confession is invalid. According to John Burrow, Gawain confesses instead of hearing Mass, since he perceives his actions to be sinful. However, he apparently neither repents for breaking his agreement with Bertilak, nor resolves to sin no more.

[431] Atria A. Larson, *Master of Penance: Gratian and the Development of Penitential thought and Law in the Twelfth Century,* Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2014, p. 35.
[432] Larson, p. 41.
[433] They justify St Peter's episode by claiming that the confession took place when he openly disclosed his love for Jesus and satisfaction took place when he cried for his sin. Larson, p. 38-41.
[434] Larson, p. 38.
[435] This theme will be further explored in the next section.
[436] Burrow, 'The Two Confession Scenes in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"', p. 75.

Had this been the case, he would have given up the girdle. As Claudius evocatively states in Shakespeare's *Hamlet,* there can be no repentance without restitution.

> My fault is past – but, O, what form of prayer
> Can serve my turn? 'Forgive me my foul murder'?
> That cannot be, since I am still possessed
> Of those effects for which I did the murder –
> My crown, mine own ambition and my queen.
> May one be pardoned and retain th'offence? (3.3.51-6)[437]

Furthermore, according to the Parson, repenting souls should perform three actions in order to deserve God's forgiveness: they should receive baptism after confession, "the firste is that if a man be baptized // after that he hath synned" (ll. 96-7), truly repent for what they did, and not commit the same sin after having been baptised. As for the first condition, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the words of the Green Knight might be considered a reference to baptism, since he proclaims Gawain pure and *clene* as a new born, "I halde þe polysed of þat plyȝt, and pured as clene //As þou hadez neuer forfeted syþen þou watz fyrst borne" (ll. 2393-4). Christian celebrations such as weddings and baptisms were conventionally followed by banquets. Therefore, the Green Knight's reference to a feast waiting for them at his castle further reinforces the idea that some sort of baptism has taken place at the Green Chapel, "And we schyn reuel þe remnaunt of þis ryche fest // ful bene" (ll. 2402-3). The other two conditions might support John Burrow's hypothesis. In spite of having received the priest's absolution, Gawain could hardly be considered truly contrite since he does not resolve to give up the girdle and thus falls back into the same sin he has just obtained remission for.

Chaucer's Parson also lists the six causes that should trigger true contrition in one's soul. The first condition is that all sins should be remembered with shame.

> First a man shal remembre hym of his synnes; // but looke he that thilke remembraunce ne be to hym no delit by no wey, but greet shame and sorwe for his gilt. (ll.132-3)

According to Gratian in his *De Penitentia,* shame paves the way for humility. In order to obtain mercy and forgiveness, one should openly confess to a priest in order to show humbleness, since

[437] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, edited by G.R. Hibbard, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

silence is born of pride[438]. Only those who show humility deserve mercy, since only by shamefully confessing one's malefactions to someone else, one practices the humility required for remission[439]. Therefore, as long as pride dwells in one's heart, there can be no place for humility and if there is no humility, there can be no mercy. Gratian also adds that pride might lead to refusing to confess, since it might not only numb the perception of the seriousness of one's misdeeds, but also persuade the penitents to believe that they can somehow be justified[440]. Interestingly enough, this might also apply to Gawain's perception of his fault. He might have felt that his keeping the girdle was entirely justified by his desire to maintain his as well as Lady Bertilak's honour untarnished. Furthermore, as soon as the Green Knight discloses his as well as his wife's machinations behind the tests, Gawain blames women for deceiving honourable men and thus partially holds one of them responsible for his fault. These accusations reinforce the idea that Gawain is reacting out of pride, since, according to Gratian, not only do proud sinners feel they have acted righteously, but they also want everyone else to believe so[441].

The second point made by Chaucer's Parson is that one should despise sin because it enslaves their soul.

> The seconde cause that oghte make a man to have desdeyn of synne is this: that, as seith Seint Peter, "whoso that dooth synne is thral of synne"; and synne put a man in greet thraldom. (l. 141)

The third cause for contrition is fear of the eternal punishment of hell.

> The thridde cause that oghte moeve a man to Contricioun is drede of the day of doom and of the horrible peynes of helle. (l. 157)

The fourth cause for contrition is one's remembering the good they once did and to what extent it has been overshadowed by the evil they have subsequently done.

> The fourthe point that oghte maken a man to have contricion is the sorweful remembraunce of the good that he hath left to doon heere in erthe, and eek the good that he hath lorn. (l. 230)

[438] Larson, p. 82.
[439] Larson, p. 82.
[440] Larson, p. 83.
[441] Larson, p. 84.

This condition seems to apply to Gawain's confession to the Green Knight, in which he painfully admits he has betrayed his *kynde*[442]. The fifth cause is the remembrance of Christ's passion and death.

> The fifthe thyng that oghte moeve a man to Contricioun is remembrance of the passioun that oure Lord Jhesu Crist suffred for oure synnes. (l. 254)

In this light, the pentangle depicted on Gawain's shield should function as a means to elicit a feeling of contrition, since it also represents the five wounds of Christ, a symbol of the Saviour's passion and death and consequently a symbol of Christian faith. The last cause for one's contrition is in fact tripartite and consists in the hope for God's forgiveness and grace, as well as for the achievement of the glory of Heaven.

> The sixte thyng that oghte moeve a man to contricioun is the hope of three thynges; that is to seyn, foryifnesse of synne, and the yifte of grace wel for to do, and the glorie of hevene, with which God shal gerdone man for his goode dedes. (l. 282)

It might be worth emphasising that it is almost impossible to determine whether Gawain's can be considered true contrition, as some conditions listed by the Parson hardly appear applicable to his behaviour. Nonetheless, this discrepancy might be yet another way for the Gawain-poet to emphasise to what extent real life situations can be complex as compared to what is described in manuals.

The Parson also warns his audience that one's contrition should be complete in order to be considered valid, "it shall been universal and total" (l. 291). True contrition cannot exist if one conceals, for whatever reason, some sins.

> The repentaunce of a synguler synne, and nat repente of alle his ohter synnes, or elles repenten hym of alle his othere synnes, and nat of a synguler synne, may nat availle. (l. 299)

According to Gratian, a major distinction can be drawn between mercy for sins and remission of sins. Mercy for sins can be obtained by contrition of the heart alone, whereas, in order to obtain remission one would also need oral confession[443]. External penance thus entails the penitent's submission to ecclesiastical authority, which is thereby preserved. However, by the end of the

[442] This theme will be explored in the next section.
[443] Larson, p. 68.

fourteenth century, all theologians agreed that both inward contrition and outward confession were needed in order to obtain remission of sin[444].

Confession was certainly imperative when Christians perceived themselves to be in such a condition that their death might be considered impending. Soldiers extensively confessed before battles in order to be prepared for the worst. For instance, before the battle of Agincourt confessions were reported to be heard throughout the night, so that in case the soldiers did not survive the day, they would not die unshriven[445]. Apart from soldiers waiting for upcoming battles, even those who found themselves in a condition of irreversible infirmity should confess with no hesitation. In the first *novella* of Boccaccio's *Decameron,* for instance, the two brothers from Florence who are hosting an almost dying Ser Ciappelletto are concerned about the possibility that he could die with no confession. In that case, he would be denied a proper funeral as well as an honourable burial. However, if he confessed all his hateful sins, he would be condemned all the same and cast in a ditch like a dog. In both cases, the brothers' reputation would be compromised. The brothers prove to be in no way better than Ser Ciappelletto: both their Christian piety and human pity for a dying man are inexistent. They would hardly hesitate to throw their friend out of their home if only their reputation and business were not affected by this action.

> D'altra parte, egli è stato sí malvagio uomo, che egli non si vorrà confessare né prendere alcuno sagramento della Chiesa; e, morendo senza confessione, niuna chiesa vorrà il suo corpo ricevere, anzi sarà gittato a' fossi a guisa d'un cane. E, se egli si pur confessa, i peccati suoi son tanti e sí orribili, che il simigliante n'avverrà, per ciò che frate né prete ci sarà che 'l voglia né possa assolvere: per che, non assoluto, anche sarà gittato a' fossi. E se questo avviene, il popolo di questa terra, il quale sí per lo mestier nostro, il quale loro pare iniquissimo e tutto il giorno ne dicon male, e sí per la volontà che hanno di rubarci, veggendo ciò si leverà a romore e griderà: 'Questi lombardi cani, li quali a chiesa non sono voluti ricevere, non ci si voglion piú sostenere'; e correrannoci alle case e per avventura non solamente l'avere ci ruberanno ma forse ci torranno oltre a ciò le persone: di che noi in ogni guisa stiam male se costui muore.[446]

[444] Low, p. 4.
[445] Anne Curry, *Agincourt a New History,* Stroud: Tempus, 2006, p. 215.
[446] Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron,* edited by Antonio Enzo Quaglio, Milano: Garzanti, 1974, p. 37. "On the other hand he has been so bad a man that he is sure not to confess or receive any of the Church's sacraments; and dying thus unconfessed, he will be denied burial in church, but will be cast out into some ditch like a dog; nay, 'twill be all one if he do confess, for such and so horrible have been his crimes that no friar or priest either will or can absolve him; and so, dying without absolution, he will still be cast out into the ditch. In which case the folk of these parts, who reprobate our trade as iniquitous and revile it all day long, and would fain rob us, will seize their opportunity, and raise a tumult, and make a raid upon our houses, crying: 'A way with these Lombard dogs, whom the Church excludes from her pale;' and will certainly strip us of our goods, and perhaps take our lives also; so that in any case we stand to lose if this man die." Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron,* translated by J. M. Rigg.

It is uncertain whether Ser Ciappelleto really acts out of compassion for the troubles he might cause to his friends, or more probably in order to play yet another prank even on God; nonetheless, his confession is entirely made-up. Ser Ciappelletto's confession is invalid beyond any doubt, since there is no contrition and no true confession on his part; consequently, there can be no forgiveness. He might well have deceived the holy friar who listened to his confession and absolved him, but he will never be able to deceive God. His soul is irremediably destined to dwell in hell. However, the late medieval debate on the possibility that contrition might suffice to obtain God's forgiveness is all condensed in Panfilo's conclusion of his story. He wonders whether Ser Ciappelletto in his very last breath repented for all his sins and thus obtained God's forgiveness.

> Cosí adunque visse e morí ser Cepparello da Prato e santo divenne come avete udito. Il quale negar non voglio esser possibile lui esser beato nella presenza di Dio, per ciò che, come che la sua vita fosse scellerata e malvagia, egli poté in su lo stremo aver sí fatta contrizione, che per avventura Idio ebbe misericordia di lui e nel suo regno il ricevette: ma per ciò che questo n'è occulto, secondo quello che ne può apparire ragiono, e dico costui piú tosto dovere essere nelle mani del diavolo in perdizione che in Paradiso. E se cosí è, grandissima si può la benignità di Dio cognoscere verso noi, la quale non al nostro errore ma alla purità della fé riguardando, cosí faccendo noi nostro mezzano un suo nemico, amico credendolo, ci essaudisce, come se a uno veramente santo per mezzano della sua grazia ricorressimo.[447]

However, the brothers' reaction to Ser Ciappelletto's sacrilegious confession is very much the same as Boccaccio's audience: they enjoyed the prank, "avevano alcuna volta sì gran voglia di ridere"[448], and almost admire their friend's boldness.

> Che uomo è costui, il quale né vecchiezza né infermità né paura di morte, alla qual si vede vicino, né ancora di Dio, dinanzi al giudicio del quale di qui a picciola ora s'aspetta di dovere essere, dalla sua malvagità l'hanno potuto rimuovere, né far che egli cosí non voglia morire come egli è vivuto?

Boccaccio avoids providing any moral judgement on his story; he conversely exalts human wit. The audience laughs at Ser Ciappelletto's insolence and ability to play this last prank and crown a life of

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https://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/dweb/texts/DecShowText.php?myID=nov0101&lang=eng [accessed on 15/03/2020]

[447] Boccaccio, p. 47. "So lived, so died Ser Cepperello da Prato, and came to be reputed a saint, as you have heard. Nor would I deny that it is possible that he is of the number of the blessed in the presence of God, seeing that, though his life was evil and depraved, yet he might in his last moments have made so complete an act of contrition that perchance God had mercy on him and received him into His kingdom. But, as this is hidden from us, I speak according to that which appears, and I say that he ought rather to be in the hands of the devil in hell than in Paradise. Which, if so it be, is a manifest token of the superabundance of the goodness of God to usward, inasmuch as He regards not our error but the sincerity of our faith, and hearkens unto us when, mistaking one who is at enmity with Him for a friend, we have recourse to him, as to one holy indeed, as our intercessor for His grace."

[448] Boccaccio, p. 45. "At times could scarce refrain their laughter."

cunning and misdeeds by deceitfully achieving the fame of a holy man. Therefore, Boccaccio's *novella* only marginally seems to reflect on the contemporary debate on penance and God's forgiveness; it conversely exalts the entirely human ability to find a way out all the same. According to John Burrow, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is equally not intended to contribute to the debate on the sacrament of penance, but it might well reflect on it[449]. The Gawain-poet might have wanted to reflect on the complexity of human nature and thus emphasise to what extent it might be hard to determine whether one's actions were excusable or not. However, Ser Ciappelletto's confession is obviously invalid and intended to be so; on the contrary, Gawain's might have been conceived in order to awaken the audience's consciences and raise awareness on human fallibility and the dangers of pride.

4.1 From divine to human: three confession scenes

Since penance appears to hold centre stage in the poem, great attention has been devoted to the confession scenes taking place in the third and the fourth fitts of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In particular, as mentioned before, many scholars, such as John Burrow, have questioned the validity of Gawain's first confession, arguing that Gawain's concealment of the girdle has affected its reliability[450]. Many scholars have also compared the confession scene taking place before the priest to that before the Green Knight, arguing that the latter is a re-enactment of the former. This identification would be grounded in the Green Knight's last words, which evoke the absolution formula issued by the priest.

> I halde þe polysed of þat ply3t and pured as clene
> As þou hadez neuer forfeted syþen þou watz fyrst borne. (ll. 2393-4)

However, both confessions would lack something: in the first, Gawain apparently lacks the proper disposition, but he respects the form, whereas in the second, he has the proper disposition, but the form is not respected, since the Green Chapel is not a proper chapel and the Green Knight is not a

[449] Burrow, 'The Two Confession Scenes in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"', p. 77.
[450] Burrow, 'The Two Confession Scenes in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"', p. 74.

priest and his nature might also be rooted in a pre-Christian past [451]. Consequently, the Green Knight cannot absolve Gawain, but rather understand his reasons and thus forgive him[452]. Therefore, the priest would have the power to cleanse Gawain of all his sins if he showed true contrition by entirely disclosing his failure. On the contrary, although Gawain shows true contrition in the Green Chapel, the Green Knight has no power to cleanse him.

However, since the poem is shaped in patterns of triads, it might be worth trying to uncover a third confession scene, which could provide deeper insight into the poet's intentions. The last scene, taking place at Arthur's court, might function as a final confession scene. In this light, the first confession would take place before the divine court, whose representative is the priest, whereas the last confession scene would take place before the human court, whose representative is King Arthur. The court represented by the Green Knight seems conversely to function as some sort of threshold between the human and the divine courts[453]. The first confession scene entirely respects the late medieval practice in the sacrament of penance, since it takes a private form, is carried out by a priest, and involves the disclosure of Gawain's sins. The Gawain-poet is particularly careful in granting Gawain the privacy he is entitled to while confessing his sins, so much so that the audience does not witness the actual words exchanged between priest and penitent. Therefore, even though Gawain's concealing the girdle before confessing and his subsequently showing it at the Green Chapel make it possible to assume that he has not confessed this failure, the audience does not witness Gawain's confession and thus must trust the poet's claim that his hero's confession is entirely valid. The poet appears to stress that Gawain has no intention to deceive the priest, since his confession is sincere, "he schrof hym schyrly" (l. 1880) and comprehensive, as he confessed all his sins, "þe more and þe mynne" (l. 1881). Consequently, he leaves the priest "clene" (l. 1883) as if for the Last Judgement. According to Tolkien's edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the

[451] Burrow, 'The Two Confession Scenes in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"', p. 75.
[452] Burrow, 'The Two Confession Scenes in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"', p. 76.
[453] This theme will be explored in the next section.

word *schyrly* is a synonym of *clene*[454]. This hypothesis is grounded not only in the many other instances of the word *schyr(e)* in both *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Cleanness*[455], but also in another Middle English text, *Ancrene Wisse,* in which *schyr* means "pure", as in "schir heorte" (l. 20)[456]. Therefore, it might well have been used by the poet in order to preserve the alliterating sound / ʃ /, which characterises this line, but it might also have been used in order to provide yet another reference to the sacrament of penance, since the *shīr(e) Thuresdai* is in fact Maundy Thursday[457], the day in which annual confessions usually took place. Since the poet emphasises that after the confession Gawain is *clene,* thus possibly implying that his confession is valid, his perception of Gawain's retention of the girdle might be that his hero has not committed a sin against God, but rather against honour[458]. As a result, a distinction between sin and shame seems to emerge. As Low points out, sin is something one can repent of and thus is remediable. Even an incomplete confession can be amended by a complete and sincere one. On the contrary, shame can be concealed, but never removed; once reputation is lost, one's honour can never be entirely restored[459]. This is a point also made by Gawain, who painfully declares that he will be ashamed forever after, "For mon may hyden his harme bot vnhap ne may hit, // For þer hit onez is tachched twynne wil hit neuer" (ll. 2511-2).

If the confession taking place before the priest is characterised by the private disclosure of Gawain's sins, the confession taking place at Arthur's court is conversely some sort of public penance. However, the court of men, presided by King Arthur, can only judge Gawain as far as a possible breach of the chivalric code is concerned. Therefore, King Arthur is entitled to decide whether a failure of courage can be retrieved in Gawain's behaviour or not. In this respect, Arthur's

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[454] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, edited by J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967, p. 210.
[455] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ll. 317, 506, 619, 772, 957, 1331, 1379, 2084, 2256, 2313; *Cleanness*, ll. 553, 605, 1121, 1278, 1690.
[456] *Ancrene Wisse,* edited by Robert Hasenfratz, https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/hasenfrantz-ancrene-wisse-part-seven [accessed on 17/03/2020]
[457] https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED39984/track?counter=1&search_id=3172318 [accessed on 17/03/2020]
[458] Low, p. 11.
[459] Low, p. 16.

reaction is quite ambiguous. If on the one hand, Arthur's laughing might have been introduced by the poet to emphasise the groundlessness of Gawain's fierce self-accusations, on the other, nothing is said about the King's actual words except that he tries to comfort Gawain, "Þe kyng comfortez þe kny3t" (l. 2513). It might be worth emphasising that comfort is needed when something is lost. Therefore, Arthur might have wanted to comfort Gawain for the loss of his reputation. In this light, Arthur's reaction could somehow be expected, since his understanding the whole test as a war might lead to inferring that he can measure one's value only by heroic deeds. On the contrary, as stressed in the previous chapter, Gawain's failure does not seem to be a failure of courage, but rather a failure of faith; therefore, Arthur cannot absolve Gawain for a sin that can be considered, legally speaking, outside his jurisdiction. Furthermore, if Gawain's failure could really be considered a failure of faith, yet another shadow of ambiguity would be cast on the poet's claim that Gawain was *clene* after the first confession.

As mentioned before, Gawain's outburst of anger at the Green Chapel might resemble a confession scene, since Gawain openly discloses his fault and is subsequently forgiven for it. The parallelism between the abovementioned confession scenes can also be found on the grounds of the words used.

> And he asoyled hym surely and sette hym so clene
> As domezday schulde haf ben di3t on þe morn. (ll. 1883-4)
>
> Þou art confessed so clene, beknowen of þy mysses,
> And hatz þe penaunce apert of þe poynt of myn egge,
> I halde þe polysed of þat ply3t and pured as clene
> As þou hadez neuer forfeted syþen þou watz fyrst borne. (ll. 2391-4)

However, since the priest is enacting a proper confession, he is entirely entitled to absolve the penitent and thus the verb *asoyled* can be used; on the contrary, this verb cannot be used by the Green Knight, who conversely uses the word *polysed*. Gawain's state after the confessions taking place before both the Green Knight and the priest is described with the adjective *clene*, "sette hym so clene" and "pured as clene" followed by an almost identical structure, which emphasises the extent to which Gawain has been cleansed of his sins, "As domezday schulde haf ben di3t on þe

morn" and "As þou hadez neuer forfeted syþen þou watz fyrst borne". Furthermore, the Green Knight claims to have entirely forgiven, *halde*, Gawain's misdeeds. According to the *Middle English Dictionary*, the word *halde* also means "to save spiritually", thus implying that the Gawain-poet might have intended the Green Knight as a benevolent creature. However, even though the location is called Green Chapel, it does not resemble a Christian chapel, but rather a pagan site of worship. In Arthurian romances, chapels located in the wilderness are not uncommon and are often described as guarded by fiends or other supernatural creatures hindering the hero's path[460]. The remote chapels populating standard Arthurian romances can hardly be considered appropriate places for the administration of sacraments. The possibility that the Green Chapel might rather be a place where the sacrament of penance can be administered is quite disorienting, given the ambiguous nature of the place. Furthermore, the Green Knight's almost acting as a priest is also disturbing as it is still unclear what kind of creature he really is. According to the Green Knight, life is a precious gift and should not be wantonly wasted. Consequently, since Gawain's actions were prompted by fear of the death, they can be considered neither those of a coward nor a reason for shame. On the contrary, the Green Knight perceives Gawain as the purest and the most courageous knight that ever lived, "sothly me þynkkez // On þe fautlest freke þat euer on fote ȝede" (ll. 2362-3). Although Gawain cannot forgive himself for having lost his reputation, the Green Knight believes his breaking the agreement to be a minor fault. Therefore, the poet's declaring that after the confession with the priest, Gawain is *clene* might not imply a note of irony as stressed by John Burrow[461], but rather emphasise that the sin committed by Gawain might be in fact not a sin in the strictest sense.

John Burrow bases his hypothesis on Gawain's willingly concealing the girdle from the priest. His behaviour would imply there is no contrition on Gawain's side. However, one should take into account that according to Gratian, true contrition is required for "crimen", which means a mortal

[460] Turville-Petre, p. 49.
[461] Burrow, 'The Two Confession Scenes in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"', p. 74.

sin[462]. Therefore, in order to determine whether Gawain's retention of the girdle could be considered a mortal sin or a breach of the chivalric code, it might be worth analysing the words Gawain uses in his self-accusations. Gawain claims that his behaviour has been prompted by covetousness, cowardice, and untruth. In this light, he seems to be persuaded to have committed at least two mortal sins: covetousness and untruth. However, many scholars have emphasised that Gawain accuses himself thrice of covetousness and cowardice, sins that in fact he did not commit. An in-depth analysis of the words used by Gawain reveals that he uses the term *vntrawthe* only twice and he never refers to his behaviour, but rather describes the girdle as a sign of untruth, "þe token of vntrawþe", as well as a sin he has always been afraid of, "ferde haf ben euer of trecherye and vntrawþe". On the contrary, he defines his sin as *vnleuté.* According to the *Middle English Dictionary*, this word could also be used to refer to a breach in an agreement. This interpretation might be reinforced by the poet's using this word only in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, whereas elsewhere he uses *vntraw(th)e* (*Cleanness*: "resounez vntrwe" (l. 184); " cobyal vntrwe" (l. 456); "þat folke in her fayth watz founden vntrwe" (l. 1161) ; "vntrwe þou hit fyndez" (l. 587)). The Green Knight too defines Gawain's failure as a lack of *lewté*, "lewté yow wonted" (l. 2366) and not as a lack of *trawþe*, which might be expected since the sin associated with a lack of *trawþe* is Lucifer's, as described in Cleanness, "fayled in trawþe" (l 236). However serious Gawain's sin might be, it could hardly be compared to the root of all evils. Furthermore, according to Field, *vntrawþe* might also mean uncleanness, adultery[463], since, as the poet explains in *Cleanness,* God "hates helle non more þen hem þat ar sowlé" (l.168). Consequently, in this poem, it is also Gawain's chastity to be tested[464] and, in this respect, he succeeds. Interestingly enough, if *vntrawþe* can be considered a synonym of adultery, the sins Gawain has always been afraid of are in fact those that will provoke the downfall of Arthur's reign. If on the surface Gawain's self-accusation seems quite fierce, through an attentive analysis one might uncover that his perception of his fault is

[462] Larson, p. 36.
[463] P. J. C. Field, "A Rereading of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*", *Studies in Philology,* 68 (1971), p. 268.
[464] Field, p. 268.

much closer to the Green Knight's than one would expect. Gawain appears more inclined to find excuses for his behaviour. As for the other accusations, namely covetousness and cowardice, Gawain himself seems to be willing to clarify that he cannot be held responsible for both. As for his possible lack of courage, he appears to shift the blame to Lady Bertilak, who joins the company of all those mischievous women of the past who were responsible for having deceived honourable men. As for covetousness, he immediately clarifies that he will henceforth keep the girdle not by virtue of its value, but rather as a memento of his failure.

> "Bot your gordel," quoþ Gawayn, "– God yow forȝelde! –
> Þat wyl I welde wyth guod wylle, not for þe wynne golde,
> Ne þe saynt, ne þe sylk, ne þe syde pendaundes,
> For wele ne for worchyp, ne for þe wlonk werkkez" (ll. 2429-32)

This attempt to find some excuses for one's sinful behaviour is foretold by Gratian, who depicts it as typical of the sin of pride[465].

However, Gawain also accuses himself of having been *fawty* and *falce.* The adjective *fawty* derives from the noun *fawte*, which, according to the *Middle English Dictionary*, means not only "moral defect or imperfection", but also "failure to perform an obligation", "neglect a duty". This noun is used by the poet in *Cleanness* (l. 1736), when he describes Belshazzar's misdeeds in order to convey to what extent he neglected his obligations as a King and jeopardised his realm, which would shortly be conquered by the Persians. Therefore, considering the use the poet makes of the word *fawty,* it is possible to infer that Gawain is echoing his previous accusation of having betrayed his *kynde,* his duties as a knight, "my kynde to forsake" (l. 2380).

According to the *Middle English Dictionary,* the meaning of *kynde* stretches from nature to individual qualities, or even to lineage. In this respect, Gawain's claim takes an almost encompassing value. He has not only betrayed himself as a Christian and as a knight, but he has also betrayed his ancestors. His powerful lineage is now overshadowed by his failure. However, as stressed by Reynolds, the word *kynde* is mentioned seven times in the poem[466]. All the meanings of

[465] Larson, p. 84.
[466] Evelyn Reynolds, 'Kynde in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight', *Arthuriana*, 28 (2018), p. 30.

this word are explored throughout the poem and, by a process of semantic widening, *kynde* comes to symbolise, in the last occurrence, the entire extent of Gawain's perception of his failure. The word first occurs in the very first lines and means the noble lineage to which Aeneas belongs, "highe kynde" (l. 6). Therefore, the poet does not mention lineage in general, but rather Gawain's own lineage. The second and the fifth references to *kynde* undoubtedly refer to the refinement of courtly manners, "kyndely serued" (l. 135), as well as to the merriment of the court, "kynde caroles of kny3tez and ladyez" (l. 473). The third reference serves to praise the courage and the prowess of the Knights of the Round Table, "þe wy3test and þe worþyest of þe worldes kynde" (l. 261). The fourth reference is to Arthur's individual qualities, "þe kyng as kene bi kynde" (l. 321), whereas the sixth describes the ability to perform a task properly, in this case, to dismember the animals according to their nature, "and þat þay neme for þe noumbles bi nome as I trowe bi kynde" (l. 1349). These meanings appear to converge in Gawain's self-accusation: he blames himself for having simultaneously neglected the qualities proper to a knight, his lineage, and his courtly manners. As Reynolds posits, he has betrayed his own identity since "action defines identity and identity defines action"[467].

The word *falce* is used by the poet in both *Cleanness* and *Patience* as a synonym of *vntrawe*, since it refers either to Lucifer or to the adoration of false gods (*Cleanness*: "falce fende", (l. 205); "He fylsened þe faythful in þe falce lawe // To forfare þe falce in þe faythe trwe" (ll. 1167-8); "falce goddess" (l. 1523); *Patience*: "falce of my hert" (l. 283); "falce werkes" (l. 390)). However, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* this word is used only once and can hardly mean *vntrawe,* since, as previously mentioned, Gawain does not use this word to depict his own behaviour. However, according to the *Middle English Dictionary*, *falce* can also be used to describe the deceitful behaviour of a fox. Interestingly enough, the final and decisive temptation scene is mirrored by the hunting of a fox. The poet uses both the English word *fox* and the French word *Reynard* in order to describe the hunted animal. *Reynard* became a synonym of fox after the Old French romance,

[467] Reynolds, p. 29.

Roman de Renard, whose protagonist is a fox renowned for its cunning. The poet appears to use the English word fox when he describes the phases of the hunt (ll. 1699, 1895, 1944, and 1950), in which the fox plays the passive role of the hunted animal. On the contrary, the French word is used when the fox has all the agency and uses its cunning to escape the hunters (ll. 1728, 1898, 1916, and 1920). Apart from a first occurrence in line 1728, in which the *Reynard* is almost praised for its wiliness, the French word is used again only after Gawain's first confession. The use of the French word might not only be prompted by the poet's desire for lexical richness, but also be considered yet another way to point out the ambiguities at the very heart of Gawain's confession. Furthermore, the poet's mentioning the fox's soul, "Þe rich rurd þat þer watz raysed for Renaude saule // with lote" (ll. 1916-7) might be considered a reference to Gawain's soul, as much as his mentioning the fox's coat (not fur), "And syþen þay tan Reynarde, // And tyruen of his cote" (ll. 1920-1) might be considered a reference to Gawain's being undressed of his virtue and dressed with courtly garments. Gawain's accusations of having been *fawty, falce,* and of having betrayed his *kynde* all point in the same direction: Gawain feels ashamed because he feels he has not lived up to expectations and has disappointed his community. He might also perceive his behaviour as quite deceitful, *falce,* as that of a fox, thus implying that he painfully becomes aware that his renown might have been achieved more through social grace and wiliness than through heroic deeds. It can easily be inferred how such a realisation might have seemed dishonourable to a knight.

Wassermann suggests a parallel between Dante's *Inferno* XXVII and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* since, in both cases, the validity of a confession holds centre stage. Guido da Montefeltro, like Gawain, is described as a great warrior; nonetheless, unlike Gawain, he is renowned more for possessing the wiliness of a fox than for his bravery.

> Io fui uom d'arme, e poi fui cordigliero,
> credendomi, sì cinto, fare ammenda;
> […]
> L'opere mie
> Non furon leonine ma di volpe. (ll. 67-76)[468]

[468] Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia,* edited by Umberto Bosco and Giovanni Reggio, Milano: Le Monnier, 1994. "I was a warrior, then a Cordelier; // Thinking thus girt to purge away my stain […] all the deeds I wrought // Were fox-

Furthermore, Wasserman points out that the rope wrapped around Guido's waist after making his vows as a friar can be compared to the girdle[469]. However, it might be worth emphasising that since the rope is the embodiment of Guido's sincere conversion, a parallel cannot be drawn with the green girdle, but rather with the white girdle symbolising Gawain's purity in the first arming scene. Yet another parallel can be drawn on the basis of fame: both Guido and Gawain prove to be deeply concerned about their reputations. Guido clearly declares that since his renown amongst the living is that of a saint, he would never reveal his name to a living soul over fear that he might be henceforth remembered as a traitor. Both episodes are characterised by a temptation scene. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* the tempter is Lady Bertilak, whereas in Dante's *Inferno,* the tempter is pope Boniface VIII. The pope promises Guido that since he possesses the two keys representing the power to excommunicate, as well as that to save worshippers' souls, he can absolve him for the sin he is about to commit.

> Tuo cuor non sospetti;
> Finor t'assolvo, e tu m'insegna fare
> Sì come Penestrino in terra getti.
> Lo ciel poss'io serrare e disserrare,
> Come tu sai; però son due le chiavi
> Che'l mio antecessor non ebbe care. (ll. 100-5)[470]
>
> Da che tu mi lavi
> Di quel peccato ov'io mo cader deggio,
> Lunga promessa con l'attender corto
> Ti farà triunfar ne l'alto seggio. (ll. 108-11)[471]

The pope askes Guido to betray his principles and seize the stronghold of Colonna's family, the city of Palestrina, on his behalf. Guido da Montefeltro, convinced by the pope's reassurance regarding his absolution, commits the sin of treachery. As he is dying, a fiend comes to steal his soul from Saint Francis's hands on the grounds of logic. Since it is impossible to repent for an action that one

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like and in no wise leonine." Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, The Inferno*, translated by James Romanes Sibbald, Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1884, p. 205.

[469] Julian Wasserman, Liam O. Purdon, 'Sir Guido and the Green Light: Confession in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Inferno* XXVI', *Neophilologus,* 84 (2000), p. 650.

[470] "For fear be in thy heart no room; // Beforehand I absolve thee, but declare // How Palestrina I may overcome. // Heaven I unlock, as thou art well aware, //And close at will; because the keys are twin // My predecessor was averse to bear", p. 206.

[471] "Since from this sin // Thou dost absolve me into which I fall— // The scant performance of a promise wide // Will yield thee triumph in thy lofty stall", p. 206.

is about to commit and commit it all the same, Guido's contrition is insincere and thus he deserves hell.

> Venir se ne dee giù tra ' miei meschini
> Perché diede 'l consiglio frodolente,
> Dal quale in qua stato li sono a' crini;
> Ch'assolver non si può chi non si pente,
> Né pentere e volere insieme puossi
> Per la contradizion che nol consente. (115-20)[472]

Gawain's situation is disturbingly similar to Guido's: although the audience does not witness Gawain's first confession, it is possible to assume that, in spite of his intention to retain the girdle, he does not mention it to the priest. Consequently his contrition, like Guido's, might be considered insincere. However, had Gawain committed a mortal sin and not repented for it, he would still have been in a state of mortal sin at the end of the poem[473] and consequently doomed to the same fate as Guido. On the contrary, the ending of the poem does not seem to open this possibility: the Green Knight's relatively small punishment is proportioned to a relatively small fault[474], thus essentially excluding the presence of an unrepented mortal sin.

As John Burrow points out, the medieval audience was well aware of the doctrine involved in the sacrament of penance, the validity of which would depend on both the penitents' disposition and their respecting external forms. As for the latter, in the first confession scene the form is certainly respected, since Gawain privately confesses to a priest and the absolution formula is pronounced. On the contrary, the former seems uncertain, since Gawain has not apparently overcome his shame as required by the sacrament of penance, but rather conceals the girdle[475]. Consequently, John Burrow's viewpoint on Gawain's retention of the girdle is that it is enough to invalidate Gawain's confession[476]. On the contrary, according to Morgan, Gawain's confession cannot be considered invalid, since Gawain has no desire to conceal a mortal sin, but rather he simply does not consider

[472] "For him of right among my thralls I bear // Because he offered counsel fraudulent; // Since when I've had him firmly by the hair. // None is absolved unless he first repent; // Nor can repentance house with purpose ill, // For this the contradiction doth prevent", pp. 206-7.
[473] Field, p. 259.
[474] Field, p. 260.
[475] Burrow, 'The Two Confession Scenes in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"', pp. 74-5.
[476] Burrow, 'The Two Confession Scenes in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"', p. 75.

the retention of the girdle a sin at all[477]. Morgan quotes Aquinas's distinction in three types of defects that give birth to three different kinds of sins[478]. The first defect is the defect of reason, from which the sins of ignorance stem. The second defect is that of sensitive appetite, from which the sins of passion stem. Finally, there is the defect of will from which the sins of malice stem. Following Aquinas's classification, John Burrow's viewpoint is that Gawain committed a sin of malice, since he willingly conceals the girdle from the priest. His malice would also be revealed by Gawain's behaviour during the third exchange of gifts. After having accepted the girdle, Gawain, instead of waiting for Bertilak to offer his own winnings as in the previous days, makes the first move and offers the kisses he has won during the day. John Burrow suggests that this might be considered yet another sign of his feeling guilty. On the contrary, according to Morgan, Gawain would have committed a sin of ignorance, since he is not aware that keeping the girdle is a sin. Therefore, his contrition is sincere and his confession entirely valid. One might argue that Gawain might have acted out of ignorance; nonetheless, his major sin is pride. As stressed by Gratian, pride can blind a man to such an extent that he will be unable to understand whether he is committing a sin or not. In this respect, Gawain's preoccupation with fame might also be related to a branch of pride, namely vainglory. Although it might be impossible to determine whether Gawain's expression of grief at both the Green Chapel and Arthur's court is increased by his desire to display social grace, his shame is entirely genuine and his remorse heartfelt. Yet the purpose of the test remains beyond his grasp, since he still cannot come to terms with his human fallibility. However, Gawain remains a great hero; his remorse cannot be other than heroic[479].

[477] Gerald Morgan, 'The Validity of Gawain's Confession in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight', *The Review of English Studies,* 141 (1985), p. 10.
[478] Morgan, 'The Validity of Gawain's Confession in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight', p. 11.
[479] Burrow, 'The Two Confession Scenes in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"', p. 79.

4.2 It is all a matter a conscience

As stressed in the previous chapter, Gawain's behaviour is judged by three different courts: the divine court, represented by the priest, the human court, represented by King Arthur, and the court represented by the Green Knight, whose identity had not been defined in the previous chapter. In order to disclose the nature of the Green Knight's court, it might be worth considering that his judgement seems to involve both the divine and the human dimensions. As for the divine dimension, he emphasises that Gawain might have overestimated the perfection achievable by human beings and thus lacked humility. As for the human dimension, he emphasises that Gawain acted over fear for his life and thus should be blamed less. Since the poet has explored the boundaries separating the human and the divine throughout the poem, the confession scene taking place at the Green Chapel might thus be considered a threshold between these two dimensions. Just as the pentangle represents the kind of human perfection stretching towards the divine, so the Green Knight's court might represent the place in which the human encounters the divine. Such a place might be conscience.

Piers, in Langland's *Piers Plowman*, specifies that the only way to reach the shrine of Saint Truth is to travel through Humility until one reaches Conscience; only there will God know that the penitent loves Him above all else.

> Ac if ye wilneth to wende wel, this is the wey thider:
> Ye moten go thorugh Mekenesse, bothe men and wyves,
> Til ye come into Conscience, that Crist wite the sothe,
> That ye loven Oure Lord God levest of alle thynges, (ll. 5560-3)[480]

The affinity between *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Piers Plowman* are numerous: not only are they both concerned with the discovery of truth, but they also demonstrate that in order to discover it, humility is needed. Interestingly enough, in Langland's poem Conscience is depicted as a knight[481]. In the scholastic conception, a knight should behave like a moral judge of right and

[480] William Langland, *The vision of Piers Plowman*, London and New York: J.M. Dent and E.P. Dutton, 1978, https://quod.lib.umich.edu/c/cme/PPlLan/1:6?rgn=div1;view=fulltext [accessed on 29/03/2020]
[481] Mary C. Schroeder, "The Character of Conscience in 'Piers Plowman'", *Studies in Philology,* 67 (1970), p. 15.

wrong[482]. Therefore, if the court held at the Green Chapel really represents conscience, the audience should trust the Green Knight's judgement on Gawain's failure, and thus assume that he has only slightly sinned. Conscience, like a flesh-and-blood knight, is not an infallible figure, but rather possesses two major weaknesses: he is not inspired by divine grace, but rather convinced by reason, and tends to be courteous even when his courtesy is pointless[483]. Conscience, like Gawain, acquires higher knowledge by the end of the poem; nonetheless, the knowledge he can achieve is entirely human, since divine grace is still beyond his reach[484]. Furthermore, just as the knight's duty is to defend his king's reign, so Conscience should defend one's soul and guide it towards the truth[485]. In the mystical tradition, conscience is also the place where God dwells in people's souls[486]; therefore, only through conscience can humankind discover God[487]. Since the place in which the divine encounters the humbled man is Conscience, the confession scene taking place before the Green Knight might be interpreted as Gawain's moment of revelation. In this light, the greenness of the Green Knight might represent, as suggested by Leighton, the Epiphany[488]. The word *concience* is used by the Gawain-poet only once, when Gawain is troubled by Lady Bertilak's visitation and tries to determine the nature of the marvel he is witnessing, "Compast in his concience to quat þat cace myȝt //Meue oþer amount" (ll. 1196-7). Therefore, since the whole poem is about sin, temptation, and human fallibility, the absence of the word *concience* in its Christian meaning appears somehow surprising except if one takes into account the possibility that conscience might have been replaced by a character playing the same role, such as the Green Knight.

Furthermore, in *Piers Plowman,* Repentance explains that God has always permitted humankind to sin, since He can draw good out of evil. Therefore, although the original sin of Adam provoked

[482] Schroeder, p. 16.
[483] Schroeder, p. 25.
[484] Schroeder, p. 28.
[485] Schroeder, p. 18.
[486] Schroeder, p. 17.
[487] Schroeder, p. 17.
[488] Leighton, p. 56.

the fall of humankind, it also allowed the marriage of heaven and earth through Christ's coming into the world to save humanity.

> "For I shal biseche for alle synfulle Oure Saveour of grace
> To amenden us of oure mysdedes and do mercy to us alle.
> Now God," quod he, "that of Thi goodnesse gonne the world make,
> And of naught madest aught and man moost lik to thiselve,
> And sithen suffredest hym to synne, a siknesse to us alle –
> And al for the beste, as I bileve, whatevere the Book telleth:
> *O felix culpa! O necessarium peccutum Ade!*" (ll. 5479-84)

Consequently, Gawain's can be considered a *felix culpa* only in so far as it allows him to achieve greater self-awareness and humility. Gawain is the embodiment of the Christian hero, the most perfect of all knights and yet he is still a mere man and thus not exempt from sin. Just like Everyman, if he exclusively relies on his human virtues, he can fail; nonetheless, he should be able to transform any failure into a lesson.

Although the similarities between *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Langland's poem are numerous, they might be insufficient to support the identification of the Green Knight with Conscience. However, one should admit that the Green Knight is capable of awakening Gawain's conscience; therefore, Gawain's emotional outburst at the Green Chapel resembles more a self-accusation before a mirror than before a real person. In this light, the Green Knight functions as the mirror in which Gawain's conscience can express its judgment, as well as vent its shame and grief. Gawain's outburst of genuine indignation at the Green Chapel might in fact resemble an examination of conscience.

According to Knapp, in confronting the Green Knight, Gawain also confronts himself[489]. Consequently, this poem is not only a romance in which the adventurous and the marvellous are intertwined, but also a "fable in the penitential manner"[490]. The twofold nature of the text might stem from a contradiction at the very heart of the system of values promoted by the Arthurian revival of Edward III's reign. It was impossible to reconcile chivalric nationalism, which can be

[489] Peggy A. Knapp, "Gawain's Quest: Social Conflict and Symbolic Mediation", *Clio,* 6 (1977), p. 295.
[490] Knapp, p. 295.

considered a "collective form of pride"[491], with penitential Christianity, which warned against it. In this respect, the Gawain-poet proves to be a son of his time: he reflects on some of the most important late medieval controversies, such as those on the sacrament of penance, as well as those related to the desire to revive the ethos of King Arthur's court, in spite of the waning of the feudal chivalric world. As a result, since Gawain is the embodiment of late medieval knighthood, the very flower of chivalry, his sin cannot be other than pride. In this light, Gawain's adventure is not jeopardised by supernatural foes, but rather by blinding pride, which prevents him from understanding the very nature of the Green Knight, as well as that of the tests he is facing. As remarked by Gawain, he must henceforth wear the green girdle as a memento of his failure and as a warning against pride, source of damnation for humankind, "quen pryde schal me pryk for prowes of armes, // Þe loke to þis luf-lace schal leþe my hert" (ll. 2437-8). According to the Green Knight, this time Gawain's sin was relatively small. However, unless Gawain truly understands the nature of his sin, he might be less fortunate in the future, and thus deserve, like Guido da Montefeltro in Dante's *Commedia*, the definitive punishment of hell.

Frye outlines yet another element that allows the distinction of different fictional modes: the perception of fear and pity. In romances, fear turns into the adventurous and horror into the marvellous, whereas pity turns into chivalric rescue.[492] On the contrary, in high mimetic tragedy, pity and fear become favourable and unfavourable moral judgements. Therefore, following Frye's classification, the audience should empathise with Gawain's condition and feel pity for him, whereas they should fear the Green Knight. However, these additional features of Frye's classification can hardly apply to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* since the ambiguities at the very heart of the poem prevent the audience from having a straightforward understanding of the characters thus making the recipients of fear and pity change throughout the poem. Furthermore, the marvellous and the adventurous are still part of the story, even though they are only given marginal

[491] Knapp, pp. 290-1.
[492] Frye, p. 37.

space. It is conversely Gawain's reaction to shame that marks a real shift towards mimetic fiction. As Pearsall points out, Gawain, unlike Yvain, does not run mad in the wilderness because he feels ashamed[493]. Yvain's extreme response to shame is some sort of annihilation of human identity and the way in which conventional romance heroes show their intense grief. On the contrary, Gawain, as a real man, in spite of an equally great grief, manages to bear his shame and turns it "into the story of his life"[494].

According to John Burrow, in Ricardian poetry the main characters do not change the world by conquests, but rather come to terms with the frailties of their human nature[495]. Their adventures are characterised by a return to their initial conditions: just as Octavian in Chaucer's the *Book of the Duchess* returns to his castle without having performed any deeds of conquering, so Gawain returns to Camelot with no conventional heroic deeds to be praised for[496]. Their achievements are not public, but rather private and are curbed by the constraints of human nature. The acknowledgment of the impossibility of achieving perfection leads to drawing attention to jovial and lively men such as Bertilak or the Franklin in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales.* These men would offer an "ideal of 'mesure' which involves that sober acceptance of things as they are" [497] and should counterbalance the excessive idealism characterising romance heroes. However, although Ricardian poetry is marked by a lack of interest in fighting and heroic deeds[498], Gawain's heroic stature is not diminished, since his determination to keep his word at any cost cannot but pay homage to his outstanding courage. Humankind has always looked at heroes as models of excellence and sources of inspiration; however, in order for them to transcend the boundaries of time, we also need them to share our frailties, to be mere men.

[493] Pearsall, p. 361
[494] Pearsall, p. 361.
[495] J. A. Burrow, *Ricardian Poetry, Chaucer, Gower, Langland and the "Gawain" Poet*, London: Routledge, 1971, p. 101.
[496] Burrow, *Ricardian Poetry, Chaucer, Gower, Langland and the "Gawain" Poet,* p. 101.
[497] Burrow, *Ricardian Poetry, Chaucer, Gower, Langland and the "Gawain" Poet*, p. 129.
[498] Burrow, *Ricardian Poetry, Chaucer, Gower, Langland and the "Gawain" Poet,* p. 94.

The author ends his poem with the customary invocation to God and leaves us the freedom to draw our own conclusions. We are given the opportunity to decide whether a lesson can be learnt from Gawain's adventure, whether Gawain is a model to follow or a mere sinner, whether the Green Knight is a villain or a benevolent creature; nonetheless the poet warns us against relying on first impressions.

HONY SOIT QUI MAL PENCE.

Figure 1. MS Cotton Nero A.x., The Green Knight at King Arthur's court (f94v)

Figure 2. MS Cotton Nero A.x., Sir Gawain and Lady Bertilak (f129r)

Figure 3. MS Cotton Nero A.x., Sir Gawain at the Green Chapel (f129v)

Figure 4. MS Cotton Nero A.x., Sir Gawain's return to King Arthur's court (f130r)

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Riassunto

Questa tesi ha lo scopo di analizzare il poema tardo trecentesco, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, al fine di rilevare una possibile transizione dal modo cavalleresco a quello mimetico.

L'aspetto esteriore del manoscritto MS Cotton Nero A.x., che contiene il poema insieme ad altre tre opere verosimilmente dello stesso autore, tradisce già una notevole ambiguità. Il suo contenuto estremamente sofisticato mal si abbina infatti ad una fattura decisamente modesta. Trattandosi di un *codex unicus* di cui non sono noti né l'autore, né il committente, né la data esatta di composizione, qualsiasi interpretazione può basarsi esclusivamente su evidenze testuali. Gli studi condotti sul dialetto nel quale sono stati composti questi testi hanno consentito di identificare una possibile area di provenienza, ovvero la zona del Sud-Est del Cheshire o dello Staffordshire. Questa identificazione solleva tuttavia alcune perplessità, poiché sembra improbabile che un testo di tale raffinatezza possa essere stato composto per un pubblico provinciale. Taluni studiosi, infatti, ritengono che possa essere legato addirittura alla casa reale sia per via del motto dell'Ordine della Giarrettiera che chiude il manoscritto, sia perché il regno di Edoardo III aveva visto una notevole riscoperta del ciclo arturiano. Il poeta sembra inoltre possedere una profonda conoscenza dei costumi delle corti tardo-medievali, così come delle controversie religiose caratteristiche del suo tempo. Pertanto, molti studiosi hanno ipotizzato che l'autore potesse essere un membro degli ordini minori al servizio di un signore di notevole prestigio.

Nonostante il manoscritto sia di aspetto modesto, contiene dodici miniature, probabilmente aggiunte in un secondo momento nel primo Quattrocento. Pertanto, la datazione delle miniature non può essere utilizzata per risalire al periodo di composizione dei testi. Nel Medioevo le miniature non svolgevano solo una funzione estetica, ma anche pratica. Fungevano infatti da indice al testo oppure offrivano ulteriori interpretazioni di esso. Nel caso in esame, le miniature non ritraggono mai gesta eroiche, quali gli scontri tra Gawain e i nemici soprannaturali che lo affrontano nella

foresta, ma scene di tentazione e riconciliazione, che mostrano fin dal principio che non si è di fronte ad un tradizionale romanzo arturiano.

Ciò che maggiormente colpisce è l'estrema umanità di Gawain che consente a quest'opera di trascendere i confini del tempo, nonché al pubblico di ieri, come a quello di oggi, di entrare in empatia con il proprio campione. Secondo la classificazione dei generi letterari di Northrop Frye, il modo cavalleresco sarebbe caratterizzato non solo da una temporanea sospensione delle leggi della natura, che sono così interamente piegate agli scopi della narrazione, ma anche da un completo potere d'azione del protagonista. Al contrario, il modo mimetico vede l'eroe sottomesso ai limiti imposti non solo dalle leggi della natura, ma anche della condizione umana. Senza dubbio l'opera in oggetto ha ancora molti elementi del romanzo cavalleresco, come l'ambientazione alla corte di Artù o i draghi e i giganti che Gawain incontra lungo il suo cammino; tuttavia questi elementi sembrano avere un ruolo marginale in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Centrale invece è la figura di Gawain, che è rappresentato sì come un semplice uomo, sottomesso ai limiti imposti dalla propria natura, ma la cui statura eroica rimane inalterata. Ciò che emerge dall'analisi delle categorie proposte da Frye è che alcuni dei fattori determinanti per stabilire un passaggio dal genere cavalleresco a quello mimetico si riscontrano nella rappresentazione dell'ambiente naturale e nel ritratto dell'eroe e del suo antagonista.

Il secondo capitolo si concentra sull'analisi della rappresentazione della foresta e della corte al fine di determinare in che modo interagiscano nella storia. In primo luogo, è bene precisare che i due ambienti vengono percepiti come opposti ed antagonisti. La foresta è il caos che evoca l'antico folklore pagano, mentre la corte è proposta come un faro di civiltà nelle tenebre del caos. Il poema è inoltre caratterizzato non solo da soglie testuali costituite dalle mura che separano i castelli dal mondo esterno, ma anche da soglie paratestuali, caratterizzate dalle iniziali rubricate. Il castello di Bertilak, riccamente decorato, rappresenta una di queste soglie poiché è descritto come se fosse la dimora di creature magiche.

In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, la natura non funge solamente da sfondo alle avventure dell'eroe, ma si comporta come un personaggio vero e proprio, un nemico capace di sbarrargli il cammino. La descrizione dell'ambiente naturale varia con il procedere dell'avventura di Gawain. Infatti, non appena l'eroe passa il confine marcato dal fiume Dee ed entra nel selvaggio Wirral, la descrizione della foresta diventa fantastica, popolata da draghi, giganti e uomini selvaggi. Pur tuttavia, il poeta dà solo un'importanza marginale a questi elementi, che riassume in pochi versi poiché le creature soprannaturali che popolano la foresta selvaggia non rappresentano mai una vera e propria minaccia per la vita di Gawain. È l'inverno freddo il vero nemico, realisticamente descritto come l'elemento che può uccidere anche il più forte degli uomini. Le difficoltà che il protagonista incontra durante il suo viaggio consentono al poeta di sottolineare quanto Gawain sia in realtà legato all'ambiente di corte. La cortesia di cui dà prova e probabilmente la sua stessa vita hanno senso solo dove possono essere apprezzati. Nella landa desolata e selvaggia, la sua raffinatezza non gli è di alcun giovamento, anzi aumenta il suo senso di solitudine. È tuttavia in questa situazione di estremo pericolo che Gawain si rivela un vero eroe; non cede infatti alla disperazione, ma continua a pregare di poter raggiungere la Cappella Verde in tempo e così mantenere il suo patto. In un tradizionale poema arturiano, non solo la natura esiste solo in funzione delle esigenze narrative, ma l'eroe ha anche pieni poteri d'azione, pertanto la sua vita non è mai davvero in pericolo. Per contro, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, il potere d'azione dell'eroe sembra alquanto diminuito e la natura, lungi dall'essere rappresentata come Arcadia, diventa minacciosa e nemica. L'ululare del vento che accompagna la tormenta rievoca le atmosfere delle elegie anglosassoni, quali *The Wanderer* e *The Seafarer*, dove il solitario errare dei protagonisti è raccontato con sgomento ed angoscia. La descrizione della natura selvaggia consente all'autore non solo di attingere al folklore popolare celtico e norreno, ma anche di riflettere sulla transitorietà delle cose terrene. Tale preoccupazione per il trascorrere del tempo proietta quest'opera nel modo mimetico.

Nel Medioevo, le feste erano percepite come la rappresentazione del trionfo della civiltà sulla natura selvaggia. Giochi e banchetti consentivano quindi di piegare gli istinti primordiali, quali quello di nutrirsi e di combattere, attraverso un sistema di regole ferree e di elevarli ad un'alta forma di civiltà. Inoltre, il sofisticato ambiente cortese faceva sì che i membri dell'aristocrazia si sentissero parte di un'élite, il cui stile di vita avrebbe rispecchiato le loro qualità interiori. La bellezza esteriore era infatti considerata non solo uno specchio della virtù interiore, ma anche motivo di fama. Tuttavia, un simile stile di vita difficilmente poteva conformarsi ai principi della religione cristiana. Pertanto l'ambiguità con la quale il poeta descrive la corte di Artù potrebbe gettare un'ombra non solo sulle sontuose corti tardo-medievali, ma anche sulla loro reale funzione. Anche se non è chiaro se il poeta volesse celebrare la magnificenza delle corti di Artù e Bertilak o criticarle, non si può trascurare il fatto che entrambe siano in realtà i luoghi dove le virtù di Gawain sono maggiormente messe alla prova. In particolare, nella corte di Bertilak la tentazione è incarnata da Lady Bertilak, mentre nella corte di Camelot è incarnata dallo stesso Artù. Il Cavaliere Verde di fatto propone alla corte solo un gioco per le festività natalizie e si presenta sia con un'ascia che con un ramo di agrifoglio; è Artù ad interpretare immediatamente questo messaggio come una sfida all'ultimo sangue. La figura del leggendario re ne esce pertanto compromessa: se da una parte viene descritta con nostalgia come uno dei migliori re di sempre, dall'altra il suo comportamento è etichettato come infantile. Poiché la corte di Artù rappresenta l'ideale di perfezione al quale non solo le corti dei romanzi, ma anche quelle reali dovrebbero ambire, una tale descrizione potrebbe incrinare il sistema di valori cavallereschi sui quali la società tardomedievale era fondata.

La critica espressa nei confronti del comportamento di Artù non sembra tanto riguardare il suo temperamento impulsivo, quanto piuttosto la sua capacità di regnare. Viene da chiedersi come un buon re potrebbe mettere a repentaglio la sua stessa vita e quindi il suo regno solo per vendicare un'offesa arrecata al suo onore. Il discorso di Gawain è invece un capolavoro di retorica cortese, poiché riesce a far suo il duello nel quale Artù si era impegnato senza offendere la sua dignità

regale. Sarà questa la qualità di cui Gawain darà prova durante le scene di tentazione al castello di Bertilak.

Un altro aspetto centrale nella rappresentazione di Artù è il suo coinvolgimento attivo nella trama. Egli non resta infatti sullo sfondo ad attendere il ritorno dei suoi cavalieri, ma è coinvolto in quella che può essere considerata la prima vera scena di tentazione. Viena data grande rilevanza anche al tema della reputazione, che tuttavia non è esente da critiche. Dal momento che la corte di Artù è descritta nella sua prima giovinezza, appare difficile comprendere come abbia già potuto ottenere una fama così grande. Si può dedurre che probabilmente la reputazione del re di Camelot e dei suoi cavalieri non sia dovuta alle proprie gesta, ma piuttosto a quelle dei loro antenati. Inoltre, le aspettative non solo dei personaggi del romanzo, ma anche dei lettori si fondano sulla reputazione di Gawain, che è incarnata dal pentacolo dipinto sul suo scudo e determina il metro con il quale verranno misurate le sue gesta.

La corte provinciale di Bertilak è rappresentata da un lato come una copia minore della corte reale, dall'altro come una sorta di regno della magia. Questa impressione è confermata non solo dalla descrizione esteriore del castello, nonché dalla modalità con la quale si materializza davanti agli occhi di Gawain, ma anche dalla presenza di Morgana e di Bertilak, l'alter ego del Cavaliere Verde. Tuttavia, questa corte sembra più reale di quella di Camelot, che invece appare caratterizzata da puro idealismo. I valori promossi dal codice cavalleresco mostrano tutti i propri limiti: Gawain si trova infatti costretto a scegliere tra fedeltà e cortesia in quanto vincolato da due obblighi contrastanti. Gawain sembra essere una vittima delle convenzioni sociali, poiché è costretto ad accettare la cintura verde donatagli da Lady Bertilak per non offenderla, a non rivelare al marito il dono che ha ricevuto e quindi a venire meno alla sua parola. In questa logica di rovesciamento degli elementi tradizionali dei poemi arturiani, anche il ruolo della magia subisce un grande cambiamento. Solitamente oggetti magici e talismani svolgono un ruolo molto importante nella storia e aiutano l'eroe in situazioni altrimenti disperate. In questo caso, la cintura regalata da Lady Bertilak non ha nessun potere, se non quello di illudere Gawain di potergli salvare la vita. Quindi

nonostante la presenza di Morgana e la trasformazione di Bertilak nel Cavaliere Verde, la magia non ha un ruolo centrale, ma viene quasi messa da parte al fine di non diminuire in alcun modo l'umanità di Gawain.

Il secondo *fitt* si apre con una digressione sul trascorrere del tempo che termina con la partenza di Gawain dalla corte di Artù. Questo momento è enfatizzato da un motivo caro al romanzo arturiano: l'armamento dell'eroe. I numerosi dettagli forniti dall'autore consentono di identificare l'armatura indossata da Gawain come un modello tardo-trecentesco, oltre a rievocare il valore simbolico ad essi attribuito durante la cerimonia di investitura. Gli speroni ad esempio rappresenterebbero la rapidità con la quale il cavaliere dovrebbe diffondere il messaggio di Dio, mentre le scarpe d'arme rappresenterebbero un monito all'umiltà che deve sempre contraddistinguere un cavaliere cristiano. Dal momento che il tema dell'umiltà risulta essere centrale rispetto al poema, non sorprende l'enfasi che l'autore pone su queste parti dell'armatura. Questa descrizione è seguita dalla lunga digressione sulla simbologia del pentacolo dipinto sullo scudo di Gawain. Tale simbolo, specifica l'autore, è nuovo per Gawain, poiché solitamente il cavaliere era rappresentato dall'aquila a due teste, e quindi segnala che il Gawain protagonista di questo poema non è lo stesso a cui siamo abituati. La spada, arma cavalleresca per eccellenza, ricopre un ruolo marginale ed è legata all'azione solamente quando è brandita da Bertilak. Quando la spada descritta è quella di Gawain è stranamente inerte, pende al suo fianco come una qualsiasi altra parte del suo equipaggiamento. Se molto della personalità di Gawain può essere evinto dalla sua armatura e dal suo scudo, lo stesso non può essere detto del Cavaliere Verde, la cui identità resta misteriosa. Non ha certamente l'aspetto dei classici nemici che i cavalieri della Tavola Rotonda sono abituati ad affrontare: ha l'aspetto di una creatura soprannaturale, ma allo stesso tempo l'eleganza di un uomo di corte.

Il passaggio dedicato alla descrizione del pentacolo è introdotto anche visivamente da un'iniziale rubricata, che consente di capire che quanto verrà detto in seguito sarà cruciale per l'interpretazione del poema. L'identificazione di Gawain con il pentacolo non lascia dubbi: si tratta

di un cavaliere di perfezione quasi soprannaturale molto più vicino a Galahad che al tradizionale Gawain. Tale identificazione viene dimostrata attraverso un sillogismo che pone in relazione la perfezione simboleggiata dal pentacolo con le virtù che caratterizzerebbero Gawain. Tuttavia, tale dimostrazione logica sarebbe indebolita dall'associazione del pentacolo con re Salomone, la cui leggenda non è solamente legata alla saggezza, ma anche al fallimento, alla pazzia e alla magia. Inoltre, nel Medioevo, il pentacolo, come il pentagono, non era considerato un simbolo di perfezione divina, ma piuttosto di perfezione umana. Il poeta sfrutta inoltre la simbologia legata al numero cinque come rappresentazione dei cinque sensi, ma anche delle ferite di Cristo e delle gioie di Maria. Cinque sarebbero anche le virtù morali concatenate nel pentacolo: *fraunchyse*, *felaȝschyp*, *cortaysye*, *pité* e *clannes* (magnanimità, spirito cameratesco, cortesia, devozione e purezza). Tutte si dimostrano legate all'ambiente cortese e quindi possibili solo per un membro dell'aristocrazia.

Non è chiaro se alla fine del poema la corte riesca a capire la grandezza di quanto accaduto a Gawain. Il fatto che utilizzino la cintura verde come loro simbolo non conferma che ci sia stata davvero una comprensione da parte loro del peccato di superbia. Inoltre, il riferimento finale alla guerra di Troia ci riporta fondamentalmente al punto di partenza e rinforza l'idea che la storia si ripeta sempre uguale a se stessa e che gli errori commessi da Gawain siano gli errori che potrebbe commettere ognuno di noi. Tuttavia la fallibilità umana non sminuisce il coraggio delle azioni di Gawain, la cui statura eroica ne esce al contrario accresciuta. In tal senso, secondo la teoria di Frye, possiamo ravvisare un passaggio al modo mimetico: Gawain è un leader in grado di ispirare ammirazione, un uomo sì, ma un uomo che gli uomini seguirebbero fino alla fine.

L'altro grande personaggio del poema è il Cavaliere Verde, la cui identità misteriosa ha sollevato diverse perplessità tra gli studiosi. In particolare molti hanno cercato di comprenderne la natura basandosi sulla simbologia del colore verde. Tuttavia, nel Medioevo qualsiasi colore poteva essere interpretato sia positivamente che negativamente, lasciando unicamente al contesto il compito di fornire indicazioni sull'interpretazione che doveva essere data. Così il colore del Cavaliere Verde può essere interpretato come simbolo di una creatura appartenente al mondo dei

morti, della magia, di un demone, ma anche connotare una figura benevola e positiva che può arrivare a rappresentare persino l'Epifania cristiana. Il poeta potrebbe aver sfruttato queste plurime interpretazioni per lasciare al suo eroe, così come al suo pubblico, la possibilità di scegliere quale fosse la vera natura del Cavaliere Verde. Gawain sembra non avere dubbi a tal proposito: per lui il Cavaliere è un demone con cattive intenzioni e la Cappella Verde non è altro che la porta dell'Inferno. La presenza di una creatura evocata dalla magia non impedisce tuttavia di definire questo poema come finzione mimetica, in quanto, secondo la classificazione di Northorp Frye, l'esistenza di creature di questo tipo è possibile sebbene esse vengano percepite come provenienti da un altro mondo. Il vero scarto verso la finzione mimetica è comunque dato dalla fallibilità di Gawain, un uomo che non può fare affidamento su poteri soprannaturali, né su una maggiore conoscenza della realtà, ma può unicamente basarsi sulle virtù che Dio gli ha concesso.

Il quattordicesimo e il quindicesimo secolo furono caratterizzati da un crescente interesse per la spiritualità, che trovava la sua massima espressione in nuovi movimenti religiosi e nella fioritura del misticismo. Nel quattordicesimo secolo in Inghilterra coesistevano ancora due differenti approcci alla confessione: uno legato alla segretezza del confessionale, che consisteva nel rivelare privatamente i propri peccati ad un membro autorizzato del clero, e l'altro come un approccio pubblico che consisteva nel confessarsi davanti all'assemblea. Inoltre la Chiesa aveva il compito di insegnare al popolo come analizzare il proprio comportamento attraverso le prediche dei sacerdoti, i manuali penitenziali e durante le confessioni.

Il Medioevo fu anche caratterizzato da accesi dibattiti sulla definizione delle tre fasi che costituiscono il Sacramento della Riconciliazione (contrizione, confessione e soddisfazione), ma anche sulla necessità di ciascuna al fine di ottenere la remissione dei peccati. In particolare, tutti convenivano sul fatto che la contrizione fosse assolutamente necessaria, mentre la confessione al sacerdote restava fortemente dibattuta. Alla fine del quattordicesimo secolo tuttavia, i teologi avevano ormai stabilito che contrizione e confessione fossero ugualmente necessarie per ottenere il perdono. Inoltre, se il peccatore avesse continuato a macchiarsi degli stessi peccati per i quali aveva

ottenuto la remissione, la confessione sarebbe risultata invalidata. La confessione era inoltre ritenuta indispensabile quando una persona si fosse ritenuta vicina alla morte. In tal caso, in assenza della possibilità di confessarsi appropriatamente, la contrizione sarebbe stata sufficiente. Un altro aspetto che viene ampiamente sottolineato dai teologi medievali è il ruolo dell'orgoglio, che farebbe sì che il peccatore non si confessi interamente. Infatti, al fine di provare vera contrizione, il peccatore dovrebbe confessare umilmente tutti i propri peccati; se invece l'orgoglio gliene fa tacere alcuni, ciò significa che l'umiltà necessaria alla confessione non alberga nel cuore del penitente. L'orgoglio può anche condurre il peccatore a cercare delle giustificazioni per il proprio comportamento, come Gawain che, una volta scoperti i piani di Bertilak, accusa Lady Bertilak di averlo ingannato.

Molti dei temi relativi al sacramento della Riconciliazione dibattuti nel tardo Medioevo sono presenti nel testo: non solo Gawain ritiene necessario confessarsi in quanto si sente vicino alla morte, ma la sua confessione rispetta l'obbligo della segretezza ormai ritenuto indispensabile nel periodo in cui l'opera è stata scritta. Non assistiamo infatti alla confessione di Gawain, ma dobbiamo credere alle parole del poeta che ci garantisce la sua assoluzione. Tuttavia, anche se il tema della confessione è centrale nell'ultima parte dell'opera, l'autore non sembra voler entrare nel dibattito sul sacramento della Riconciliazione; sembra invece voler porre l'attenzione su quanto la realtà possa essere complessa rispetto ai manuali e ai trattati sull'argomento. Il poeta sottolinea inoltre i limiti della condizione umana e quanto l'orgoglio possa essere pericoloso per la salvezza dell'anima.

Nel poema si possono identificare tre scene di confessione: la prima si svolge al castello di Bertilak in presenza di un sacerdote, la seconda alla Cappella Verde in presenza del Cavaliere Verde, mentre la terza si svolge a Camelot in presenza di re Artù. Queste tre scene consentono di identificare tre differenti corti di fronte alle quali Gawain deve confessare la propria colpa. La prima può essere considerata la corte di Dio il cui rappresentate è il sacerdote, la terza potrebbe essere considerata la corte degli uomini presieduta da uno dei più grandi re. La corte del Cavaliere Verde è invece difficile da identificare, in virtù della natura ambigua della Cappella e del Cavaliere stesso.

Lo sfogo di Gawain durante questa confessione sembra essere più un esame di coscienza davanti ad uno specchio che davanti ad una persona in carne ed ossa.

È possibile tracciare un parallelo con il poema di Langland *Piers Plowman*, dove la Coscienza è rappresentata da un cavaliere investito dell'autorità di distinguere ciò che è bene da ciò che è male. Secondo Piers, per arrivare al santuario della santa Verità, il pellegrino deve camminare attraverso l'Umiltà finché non raggiunge la Coscienza: è lì che l'umano ed il divino si toccano. Sebbene tale parallelismo non consenta di identificare esattamente il Cavaliere Verde con il personaggio di Langland, è innegabile che la scena di confessione che si svolge alla Cappella Verde consenta alla coscienza di Gawain di essere risvegliata.

Gawain non è perfetto come preannunciato dal pentacolo dipinto sul suo scudo, ma è uno di noi, un uomo che con le sue fragilità e le sue imperfezioni può tuttavia trascendere i confini del tempo e conservare la sua statura eroica fino a noi. Questo poema è senza dubbio in parte ancora radicato nella tradizione del romanzo cavalleresco, tuttavia la fragilità e i limiti di Gawain lo proiettano in una dimensione diversa, quella della finzione mimetica. Dopo la consueta invocazione a Dio, il poeta ci consegna la sua opera e ci chiede, ognuno a suo modo, di sciogliere le sue ambiguità, ma ci mette ugualmente in guardia contro il pregiudizio.