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# *The Knight on the Threshold: a Thematic and Anthropological Study of the English Gawain Romances*

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## Foreword

*Bot that ye be Gawan hit gotz in mynde!*<sup>1</sup>

With these words Lady Bertilak, the wife of Sir Gawain's mysterious host in the poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, expresses her expectations toward the actions and behaviour of one of the most famous of Arthur's knights – probably *the* most famous knight in Medieval England, as is proved by the number of works that were dedicated to his figure throughout the Middle Ages in this territory, but not only there: we will see in this work how his figure appears in written as well as figurative sources throughout Europe in the Middle Ages (even if the main focus will always be on works produced in England in a period of time stretching from the fourteenth century down to the later Middle Ages). These expectations were probably the same that the audience of the time had; Gawain's fame was built mainly through a number of narratives dedicated to him, among which *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* represents the most striking example. His figure however does not appear only in English medieval poems, but has a far more ancient origin and goes beyond the geographical boundaries of the English territory reaching many other European countries. Most scholars agree on the fact that Gawain was in origin a solar deity of Celtic mythology;<sup>2</sup> his character is cited among the four most valorous knights of King Arthur in the book which contributed mostly to the building of the Arthurian legend in the Middle Ages, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*,<sup>3</sup> but also in Chrétien de Troyes's famous Arthurian poems (where he appears with the name of Gauvain). But if in the French romances Gawain's reputation is

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<sup>1</sup>Andrew, Malcolm and Ronald Waldron, eds., *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2010, p. 255, l. 1293. All quotations from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are taken from this edition.

<sup>2</sup> Hahn, Thomas, "Gawain and Popular Chivalric Romance in Britain", in Roberta L. Krueger, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 218.

<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, translated by Lewis Thorpe, London: Penguin, 1966, p. 22.

often overshadowed by that of other knights,<sup>4</sup> it is fully restored in the English medieval poems that are at the centre of the present analysis: it is exactly these poems that “Gawain’s stature and renown [...] had as its source and substance”.<sup>5</sup> A list of these poems would include: *The Avowyng of Arthur*, *The Awntyrs off Arthur*, *The Carle of Carlisle*, *The Greene Knight*, *The Jeaste of Sir Gawain*, *King Arthur and King Cornwall*, *The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawain*, *The Marriage of Sir Gawain*, *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*, *The Turke and Sir Gawain*, *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, *Libeaus Desconus* and *Ywain and Gawain*. Of these works, the first eleven have been edited in Thomas Hahn’s *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*; the last two have been excluded from his edition being plain translations of French originals<sup>6</sup>. Apart from *Libeaus Desconus* and *Ywain and Gawain*, which were composed early in the fourteenth century<sup>7</sup>, almost all these poems were written in the fifteenth century or later: “they almost certainly circulated from the 13<sup>th</sup> century on, but extant manuscripts (all of which show signs of modest origins and constant use) date from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the to the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century”.<sup>8</sup> It was exactly on the basis of these popular and heterogeneous romances that Gawain’s fame spread in medieval England, to the point that his courtesy became proverbial,<sup>9</sup> as is famously attested by Chaucer’s allusion in the *Squire’s Tale*:

That Gawayn, with his olde curteisye,  
 Though he were comen ayeyn out of Fairye,  
 Ne koude hym nat amende with a word.<sup>10</sup>

To this list it must be added what is universally considered the most important poem devoted to the character of Sir Gawain, that is, the alliterative poem of the so-called

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<sup>4</sup> Hahn, Thomas, ed., *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Hahn, “Gawain and Popular Chivalric Romance in Britain”, p. 222.

<sup>9</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> Chaucer, Geoffrey, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson. Third ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987, p. 170.

“Gawain-poet”, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, that “elaborates upon this reputation, establishing its hero as the sterling exemplar of chivalry”.<sup>11</sup> This group of poems then contributed to restore and feed what has been called the Gawain legend, an expression which contains both the idea of the ancient origins of this character, and that of a mythical and heroic reputation that was built around him through the chronicles (such as the *Historia Regum Britanniae*) and works of literature in which he appears, or which are entirely devoted to him, such as the English medieval poems of the so called “Gawain cycle”. The first chapter of my dissertation will be then devoted to a “literary genesis” of the character of Sir Gawain, to trace a short overview of his presence in myth, in “history”, and more in general in European medieval literature, while the second chapter will provide a more detailed analysis of the so-called “English Gawain romances” and of the problems connected with the definition of such a group of poems.

However, Lady Bertilak’s statement could be read in a different way, that is, as an allusion to the sometimes elusive nature of Sir Gawain’s figure. Her hesitation in matching the Gawain standing in front of her in the private room of a castle with the heroic figure of countless tales she had heard before meeting him could be due, rather than to his well-known reputation, to a difficulty in attributing a definite shape to the psychology, features, actions - and why not, external appearance - of this character, continuously shifting in the narratives he is involved in. This difficulty of Lady Bertilak’s is sometimes also that of the modern reader of medieval texts, who is usually more familiar with well-defined literary characters, endowed with definite and most times striking or peculiar physical appearances and psychological characteristics, making them unique and appealing. The nature of the texts I will be analysing does not consent such a definition for the character of Sir Gawain. As pointed out by Thomas Hahn and in Clinton Machann’s article “A Structural Study of the English Gawain

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<sup>11</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 2.

Romances”, there is a reasonable possibility that the nature of Sir Gawain in the fourteen poems which make up the Gawain cycle, including *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, is more that of a narrative function than of a definite character. His role would thus be merely that of an element of unity and repetition within the various poems, and in particular that of “an agent of Arthur and a corrector of injustice”<sup>12</sup> or, as Thomas Hahn suggests, that of the most valorous defender of Arthur’s law.<sup>13</sup> In the last section of the second chapter I will then provide an analysis of the recurrent themes and motifs that surround the figure of Gawain in the English romances devoted to him, and that enable us to think of him even as a kind of “Proppian” folk-tale hero.

Finally, the last chapter of my work will be dedicated to an anthropological analysis of the character of Sir Gawain in these poems, in order to make an attempt at understanding the reasons that may be behind his association with certain features and recurrent themes, such as the famous “Beheading Game” featured in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* among other texts, that have been proved to be of Celtic origin; this anthropological approach to the figure of Sir Gawain may then open new perspectives upon his reputation of “most courteous knight” and perfect “lady’s man”, and give us a different key to read Lady Bertilak’s statement. Her question to Gawain about who he really is will be then ideally at the basis of my analysis of this character, and will in particular interrogate the English romances of Gawain cycle to find a possible answer.

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<sup>12</sup> Machann, Clinton, “A Structural Study of the English Gawain Romances”, *Neophilologus*, 66 (1982), p. 630.

<sup>13</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 24.



## Chapter 1

### The European Gawain: the Genesis of a Character

#### 1.1 From Myth to History

When attempting to trace the origins of Gawain, in both literary and anthropological terms, one finds consistent difficulties, because even if his connections with Celtic tradition are quite evident, the nature of these connections is not always as clear as in the case of other famous Arthurian knights like Kai and Bedivere.<sup>1</sup> In the Arthurian legend, Gawain is generally identified with Arthur's nephew, being son of King Lot of Lothian and Orkney and of Morgause (or Morgain), Arthur's sister or half-sister.<sup>2</sup> As Keith Busby writes, "Gawain appears to have northern, possibly Scottish, origins, but it is impossible to trace him back to a historical model, however shadowy."<sup>3</sup> This connection with northern territories is proved by one of Gawain's first appearances in a written text, that is, William of Malmesbury's *De Gestis Regum Anglorum* (1125), where he is said to have reigned over a region called "Walweitha" (Galloway),<sup>4</sup> an area in southwestern Scotland. John Matthews argues that the association of Gawain's name with Galloway in various French and English texts suggests that the link of Gawain with the North, and in particular with southwestern Scotland, is consistent and well attested.<sup>5</sup>

One of the earliest recorded appearances we have of Gawain is not inscribed in a written text, but carved in stone. Gawain appears with the Breton name of *Galvagin* - and this is probably the earliest appearance of this name that we have<sup>6</sup> - in the carvings of the Modena

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<sup>1</sup> Busby, Keith, "Gawain", in Norris J. Lacy, ed., *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia*, New York: Garland, 1991, p. 178.

<sup>2</sup> Busby, "Gawain", p.178.

<sup>3</sup> Busby, "Gawain", p.178.

<sup>4</sup> Matthews, John, *Sir Gawain, Knight of the Goddess*, Rochester: Inner Traditions, 2003, p.37.

<sup>5</sup> Matthews, pp. 37-38.

<sup>6</sup> Matthews, p. 26.

cathedral of the Porta della Pescheria, or “Modena’s Archivolt”, dating back to a period stretching between 1090 and 1120.<sup>7</sup> The content of the scene represented in the carving has been debated by scholars; even if the names accompanying the carvings are all of Arthurian characters, it is not clear from which episode the scene represented was drawn. The most plausible interpretation is probably that of Roger Sherman Loomis, according to whom Gawain is rescuing Guinevere, Arthur’s wife, from the Giant Carrado who has abducted her.<sup>8</sup> It is not easy to trace the route followed by this early Arthurian legend to reach Italy, since the main narratives concerning Arthur and his knights were written down after the carvings were realized;<sup>9</sup> however, we know from various evidence where the core of these legends came from, that is, Celtic tradition, as is demonstrated by the fact that Arthur exists in traditions coming from Wales, Cornwall, Brittany and Southern Scotland.<sup>10</sup> The origins of Gawain and thus the connection of his character with Celtic tradition are inevitably linked to the whole of the Arthurian legend in its development, “from the shadowy Welsh tradition through medieval chronicle and romance”.<sup>11</sup>

The link between Gawain and Celtic tradition appears quite evident when we consider his appearances – or at least, the appearance of a character whose name recalls closely that of Gawain - in various written texts containing Celtic material, even if re-worked during the centuries, originating from Wales, a land where today memories of a Celtic past are still alive. The importance of Wales in the whole of the Arthurian legend proves particularly strong: “in the Celtic lands of Wales, Cornwall and Brittany, Arthur’s destiny as *rex quondam et futurus*, the once and future king, was a matter of regional pride and political

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<sup>7</sup> Matthews, p. 25.

<sup>8</sup> Matthews, p. 26.

<sup>9</sup> Matthews, p. 27.

<sup>10</sup> Hutton, Ronald, “The Early Arthur: History and Myth”, in Elizabeth Archibald and Ad Putter, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 29.

<sup>11</sup> Putter, Ad, and Elizabeth Archibald, “Introduction”, in Elizabeth Archibald and Ad Putter, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 3.

importance”.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the earliest clearly dated text where Arthur appears, the *Historia Brittonum*, was produced in Wales around 830.<sup>13</sup> Among the Welsh texts in which Gawain appears we find the *Trioedd Ynys Prydein* (the “Welsh Triads”), “one of the most reliable sources for the lost Celtic hero sagas”,<sup>14</sup> with the Welsh name of *Gwalchmai* (meaning The Hawk of May) sometimes followed by *ap Gwyar* (meaning Son of Gwyar).<sup>15</sup> As Matthews suggests,

these may well be the earliest surviving references to Gawain we possess, for though we must not forget that they are of medieval origin, there is little doubt that they derived from much earlier sources.<sup>16</sup>

The exact connection between Gawain and Gwalchmai ap Gwyar however is not clear. Glenys Goetnick<sup>17</sup> gives a detailed account of Gwalchmai’s connection with Welsh tradition and with Gawain: “Very probably Gwalchmai ap Gwyar was one of the heroes of the Old North [...]. This would correspond to the fact that Gawain was one of the most popular heroes in the English romances composed in the North of England.”<sup>18</sup> She also suggests that the source of the tales in which Gwalchmai-Gawain may be found is a region where British and Irish tradition came into contact, that is, the already mentioned Galloway.<sup>19</sup> Gawain appears with the name of Gwalchmai also in the *Mabinogion*, a collection of Welsh prose tales drawing largely from Celtic mythology, in particular in the tale *Culhwch and Olwen*, implying that this character was already known from oral narratives as the valorous nephew of King Arthur before anything on him was written down.<sup>20</sup> *Culhwch and Olwen* is also

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<sup>12</sup> Putter and Archibald, “Introduction”, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Hutton, p. 21.

<sup>14</sup> Matthews, p. 27.

<sup>15</sup> Matthews, p. 27.

<sup>16</sup> Matthews, p. 28.

<sup>17</sup> Goetnick, Glenys, *Peredur: A Study of Welsh Tradition in the Grail Legends*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1975, pp.28 – 30.

<sup>18</sup> Goetnick, p.29.

<sup>19</sup> Goetnick, p.29.

<sup>20</sup> Hahn, Thomas, “Gawain and Popular Chivalric Romance in Britain”, in Roberta L. Krueger, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p.218.

considered the oldest surviving story featuring Arthur, already represented as a powerful warlord sustained by valiant warriors,<sup>21</sup> such as Gwalchmai.

Further evidence of Gawain's connections with Celtic stories is provided by the famous "beheading game" in which Gawain is involved in various tales (the most famous of which is *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*), that has a parallel in the Irish narrative of Cu Roi and Cuchulainn.<sup>22</sup> This motive appears for the first time in written form in *Bricriu's Feast*, a Middle Irish prose narrative found in a manuscript dated 1100 but deriving from a much older story, where Cuchulainn is the protagonist of the beheading game.<sup>23</sup> The similarity between these stories suggests that the characters of Gawain and Cuchulainn could derive from a common source, or that they were in origin the same character, with Gawain keeping the memory of the famous Irish hero.<sup>24</sup> The Irish scholar Sir John Rhys was the first to advance the theory that Gawain was in origin Cuchulainn, because both can be considered solar heroes: in various tales their strength is said to augment and diminish following the trajectory of the sun in the sky, and reaching its maximum at midday.<sup>25</sup> Gawain himself has been identified with a sun-deity of Celtic tradition by various scholars due to this mysterious characteristic of his strength (as described for example in the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*).<sup>26</sup> The passage from Celtic mythology to the written tales concerning King Arthur and his knights however is not easy to trace. The Modena carvings attest to the popularity of these tales by the time they were realized; in her study *The Legend of Sir Gawain*, Jessie Weston reports the opinion of professor Zimmer, who argues on the basis of the discoveries made in the Modena Archivolt that the character of Gawain – and the legends concerning him - was already well known in the Continent by the last thirty years of the eleventh century, thus well before any of

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<sup>21</sup> Hutton, p. 23.

<sup>22</sup> Coghlan, Ronan, *The Encyclopaedia of Arthurian Legends*, Shaftesbury: Element Books, 1991, p. 98.

<sup>23</sup> Brewer, Elisabeth, *From Cuchulainn to Gawain*, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1973, p.9.

<sup>24</sup> Coghlan, p. 98.

<sup>25</sup> Matthews, p. 29.

<sup>26</sup> Dalrymple, Roger, "Sir Gawain in Middle English Romance", in Helen Fulton, ed., *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012, p. 266.

the written sources we have where Gawain appears.<sup>27</sup> This would be proved also by the many appearances in various texts of the name Walwanus (the Latin version of Gawain) in that period.<sup>28</sup>

Until now we have examined the references to Gawain in texts that are clearly works of fiction; however, attempts were also made to give the Arthurian legend the status of history, thus transforming Gawain into a historical character. One of the earliest references to Gawain that we have is in the already cited William of Malmesbury's *Gesta Regum Anglorum*,<sup>29</sup> where he appears with the Latin name of Walwanus. We do not know what are the sources used by the author of the *Gesta*, however scholars agree on the fact that his main source was oral tradition, thus showing that by the time it was written - the early twelfth century - Gawain was already the protagonist of numerous tales.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, in the text Gawain is clearly identified with Arthur's nephew, and allusions are made to his fame and military renown, implying that at the time he was already well known among learned people.<sup>31</sup> His grave is even said to have been found in a place called Rhos (in Wales), during the reign of William II,<sup>32</sup> and he is also said to have ruled over Galloway (*Walweitha*).<sup>33</sup> It is hard to say to what extent the information found in the *Gesta Regum Anglorum* can be historically reliable, however, the allusions to Gawain's reputation and to legendary objects and places connected with him show that oral stories about Gawain were known to its author, who is also the first to state clearly the genealogic link between Arthur and Gawain.<sup>34</sup> Evidence about the existence of such tales is provided by the fifteen mentions of "Galvagin"

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<sup>27</sup> Weston, Jessie L., *The Legend of Sir Gawain, Studies Upon its Original Scope and Significance*, London: David Nutt, 1897, p.8.

<sup>28</sup> Busby, "Gawain", p.178.

<sup>29</sup> Newstead, Elaine, "Arthurian Legends", in J. Burke Severs, ed., *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050-1500*, New Haven: The Connecticut Academy Of Arts And Sciences, 1967, p. 53.

<sup>30</sup> Busby, Keith, *Gauvain in Old French Literature*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1980.

<sup>31</sup> Hahn, "Gawain and Popular Chivalric Romance in Britain", p. 218.

<sup>32</sup> Coghlan, p. 98.

<sup>33</sup> Putter, Ad, "The Twelfth-century Arthur", in Elizabeth Archibald and Ad Putter, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 36.

<sup>34</sup> Busby, *Gauvain in Old French Literature*, p. 46.

in the lyrics of the French troubadours, the earliest of which (1150) is to be found in Guerau de Cabrera,<sup>35</sup> whose didactic poem (or *ensenhamen*) “Cabra joglar” contains a reference to Gawain among other Arthurian characters.<sup>36</sup> The origins of these references were probably in oral tales that circulated on both sides of the Channel by 1085, thus well before any written source we have.<sup>37</sup> This could explain also the appearance of *Galvagin* in the Modena carvings and suggests another connection between Gawain and oral Celtic tradition.

In a passage of the *Gesta*, William of Malmesbury clearly states that:

This Arthur is the hero of many wild tales among the Britons even in our own day, but assuredly deserves to be the subject of reliable history rather than of false and dreaming fable; for he was long the mainstay of his falling country, rousing to battle the broken spirit of his countrymen.<sup>38</sup>

This attempt to transfer the Arthurian legend from the status of “wild tales” to that of history was eventually undertaken by Geoffrey of Monmouth, the author of the famous *Historia Regum Britanniae*, finished around 1136, whose goal was to trace the history of the British people through a period of nineteen centuries<sup>39</sup> – from Brutus, the mythical Trojan ancestor, to Cadwallader, a seventh-century king. A consistent part of this work however is dedicated for the first time to Arthur and to his valorous deeds, to the point that the beginnings of Arthurian literature as a popular genre can be said to move from Geoffrey,<sup>40</sup> since the *Historia* met with great success: more than 186 manuscripts of the original text survive, and the text was translated and adapted in various ways.<sup>41</sup> Geoffrey’s work can be taken as a bridge between the obscure Celtic origins of the Arthurian legends and its better known

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<sup>35</sup> Busby, *Gauvain in Old French Literature*, p. 42.

<sup>36</sup> Smith, Nathaniel, “Troubadours”, in Norris J. Lacy, ed., *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia*, New York: Garland, 1991, p. 476.

<sup>37</sup> Busby, *Gauvain in Old French Literature*, p. 46.

<sup>38</sup> <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/badon/malmes.htm>, “Excerpt from William of Malmesbury’s *Gesta Regum Anglorum*”, accessed October 2012.

<sup>39</sup> Thorpe, Lewis, “Introduction”, in Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, translated by Lewis Thorpe, London: Penguin Books, 1966, p.9.

<sup>40</sup> <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/Geoffbio.htm>, “Geoffrey of Monmouth”, accessed October 2012.

<sup>41</sup> Thorpe, “Introduction”, p.28.

written form. Among his sources we find earlier written sources (such as Gildas and Nennius) and oral material,<sup>42</sup> but Celtic tradition was especially relevant to him.<sup>43</sup> Geoffrey was thus

the first to systematize this story, but it is evident that he derived many of its constituent features from pre-existing documents (such as genealogies) and oral traditions, whether these came from Wales, Cornwall or Brittany. Together with the poets just named, Geoffrey is our primary source for the transmission of Celtic tradition to the outside world.<sup>44</sup>

Geoffrey's work also established once for all the core of the "Arthurian names", those of the fundamental knights of Arthur's court, that would remain more or less always the same in the various texts following him, even if with small changes or additions required by each story.<sup>45</sup> This core of Arthurian names is one of the strongest pieces of evidence proving that the material of the Arthurian Legend is drawn from Celtic lore.<sup>46</sup> However, the historical reliability of the *Historia Regum Britanniae* can be easily questioned, as it is mainly the result of Geoffrey's original manipulation of partly historic and partly traditional material, enriched with details of his own invention: "How much allowance must be made for expansion and embellishments is admittedly hard to determine, because, first and foremost, Geoffrey was bent on turning chronicle history into literature."<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, its importance in establishing the nucleus of the Arthurian legends, later exploited by other authors throughout the centuries and the countries, cannot be denied; it is thus particularly crucial to understand the role of Gawain in Geoffrey's narration.

In Geoffrey's tale, Gawain appears among Arthur's four favourite knights together with Cadur, Bedevere and Kay.<sup>48</sup> He is depicted as a valorous and always loyal warrior, endowed with a special relationship with Arthur due to their kinship, which makes of him his

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<sup>42</sup> <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/Geoffbio.htm>, "Geoffrey of Monmouth", accessed October 2012.

<sup>43</sup> Putter, "The Twelfth-century Arthur", p. 38.

<sup>44</sup> Bromwich, Rachel, "First Transmission to England and France", in Bromwich, Rachel, A.O.H. Jarman, Brynley F. Roberts, eds., *The Arthur of the Welsh*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991, p. 275.

<sup>45</sup> Bromwich, p. 277.

<sup>46</sup> Bromwich, p.281.

<sup>47</sup> Thorpe, "Introduction", p. 19.

<sup>48</sup> Thorpe, "Introduction", p. 20.

best counsellor and probable heir.<sup>49</sup> If we look more closely at the sections where Gawain appears in Geoffrey's *Historia*, we find that he is often labelled "Arthur's nephew", a bond established in a fundamental passage where his birth from Lot and Arthur's sister is clearly stated;<sup>50</sup> he is then sent at the age of twelve to Rome, where he is made knight by Pope Sulpicius.<sup>51</sup> Later on, we find various accounts of Gawain's valorous deeds in battle on Arthur's side; he is named "the bravest of all the knights", to the point that even his enemies are happy to fight with him who "was so famous a man".<sup>52</sup> As Keith Busby points out, Geoffrey represents Gawain as a truly epic hero, since "valour, bravery and boasting are characteristics common to heroes of epic from Homer onwards".<sup>53</sup> A highly positive reputation is thus being established for Gawain by Geoffrey, and this will be found also in later chronicles drawing directly upon the *Historia*.<sup>54</sup>

Among the earliest works directly inspired by the *Historia Regum Britanniae* we find the *Roman de Brut*, written by the Norman poet Wace in the twelfth century as a vulgarization in French language of Geoffrey's main work, thus making this work available to a greater number of people. In this work, however, Gawain assumes a more courtly aspect, and prefers to praise love and chivalry rather than war.<sup>55</sup> Both Geoffrey of Monmouth and Wace were of Norman origins; it was thus in the Anglo-Norman context of the twelfth century that the Arthurian legends crystallized,<sup>56</sup> and where they gradually moved from a mainly dynastic and heroic narrative to a more courtly kind of literature, before meeting with widespread success in Chrétien de Troyes's romances, as we shall see in the next section.

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<sup>49</sup> Busby, *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia*, p.178.

<sup>50</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, translated by Lewis Thorpe, p.221.

<sup>51</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth, p.223.

<sup>52</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth, p. 254.

<sup>53</sup> Busby, *Gauvain in Old French Literature*, p.34.

<sup>54</sup> Whiting, Barlett Jere, "Gawain: His Reputation, His Courtesy and His Appearance in Chaucer's Squire's Tale", *Medieval Studies*, 9 (1947), p. 195.

<sup>55</sup> Busby, "Gawain", p.178.

<sup>56</sup> Bromwich, p. 275.



## 1.2 Gawain in Old French Literature

The Gawain we have been considering until now, basically that of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, is first of all a heroic knight, a man of war, who fights for his king and is renowned for his qualities as a warrior - namely exterminating enemies and fighting in war. However, the figure of Gawain as we have known it in Geoffrey of Monmouth was about to change radically in the Old French texts where he appears, not only in his name, that becomes Gauvain, but also in his qualities: he is no longer a fighter but becomes a courtly knight in the works of French authors like Wace, Chrétien de Troyes and their continuators.

A fundamental step in this transformation is represented by Wace's Norman adaptation of the *Historia Regum Britanniae*, the *Roman de Brut*, written around 1155.<sup>57</sup> This work represents "a key text in Arthurian studies, for it is among the earliest works to introduce Celtic matter into French."<sup>58</sup> Even if Wace was generally faithful to his source, he sometimes added details of his own invention, enriching the chronicle material (of which he maintains the structural patterns) with elements typical of the courtly *milieu* of Norman aristocracy to whom the text was directed.<sup>59</sup> In doing so, he did not limit himself to translating Geoffrey, but created an elegant work in verse which could fit the tastes of a wider audience.<sup>60</sup> This had consequences also on the depiction of Gawain, who was adapted to the literary tastes and cultural background of his new audience, thus acquiring "a courtly aspect and a leaning toward love and chivalry rather than war."<sup>61</sup> The fact that Wace represents Gawain (called *Gauveins* in his text) as a prudent knight, humble and moderate, makes clear

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<sup>57</sup> Kibler, William W., "Wace", in Norris J. Lacy, ed., *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia*, New York: Garland, 1991, p. 501.

<sup>58</sup> Kibler, p. 501.

<sup>59</sup> Busby, Keith, *Gauvain in Old French Literature*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1980, p. 35.

<sup>60</sup> Barron, W.R.J., Françoise Le Saux, Lesley Johnson, "Dynastic Chronicles", in W.R.J. Barron, ed., *The Arthur of the English*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001, p. 22.

<sup>61</sup> Brewer, Elisabeth, "Sources I: The Sources of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*", in Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson, eds., *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997, p. 144.

this shift from the world of epic chronicle to that of romance that was further developed and brought to its height by Chrétien de Troyes. For example at one point Wace defines Gawain using adjectives such as “pruz” (prudent) and “de mult grand mesure” (very moderate), deprived of any “orguil” (pride), always keen on doing and giving more than he promised (“Plus volt faire que il ne dist/ E plus duner qu’il ne pramist”).<sup>62</sup>

A key moment in the *Roman de Brut* to understand this shift and Gawain’s embrace of courtly ideals is represented by his exchange with the knight Cador, who openly speaks about the necessity of war in order to maintain the good reputation of Arthur’s court, and in doing so meets with Gawain’s strong stance in defence of peace. As Keith Busby notes, this passage “represents a small but significant change in the French literary conception of the figure of Gauvain”.<sup>63</sup> Unlike Geoffrey of Monmouth - in whose work we find a similar scene depicting Cador’s disdain of courtly leisure, but where Gawain does not appear at all, “clearly because to him Gauvain was a military leader unconcerned with the cultural or chivalric setting decried by Cador”<sup>64</sup> - in Wace Gawain replies vividly to Cador, praising the joys of peace against war. When Cador, whom we could describe as a member of the old guard – still attached to values of war and fighting – against a new generation of courtly knights, speaks publicly against the dangers of peace (“Soft living makes a sluggard of the hardest knight, and steals away his strength”),<sup>65</sup> Gawain answers with a short but effective speech:

Peace is very grateful after war. The grass grows greener, and the harvest is more plenteous. Merry tales, and songs, and ladies’ love are delectable to youth. By reason of the bright eyes and the worship of his friend, the bachelor becomes knight and learns chivalry.<sup>66</sup>

In this passage it is clear that Gawain is no longer the epic hero described by Geoffrey, but has become a perfect exponent of the Norman aristocracy that constituted Wace’s audience,

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<sup>62</sup> Wace, *Le Roman de Brut*, in Judith Weiss, ed. and trans., *Wace’s ‘Roman de Brut’, a History of the British*, Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999, p. 148, ll. 9859-9862.

<sup>63</sup> Busby, *Gauvain in Old French Literature*, p.38.

<sup>64</sup> Nitze, William A., “The Character of Gauvain in the Romances of Chrétien de Troyes”, *Modern Philology*, 50 (1953), p. 221.

<sup>65</sup> Wace, *Roman de Brut*, in Mason, Eugene, trans., *Arthurian Chronicles* London: Dent, 1970, p. 72.

<sup>66</sup> Wace, *Roman de Brut*, in Mason, p. 73.

presented “not as a rude warrior but as a chivalric knight”.<sup>67</sup> For this reason we can argue that in Wace the character of Gawain acquires far more importance and is a more rich and detailed figure than in Geoffrey of Monmouth: “Wace’s Gauvain is an admirable figure, the most elaborately described Gauvain to date, although it is possible to see a fundamental contradiction between the boastful epic warrior of some of the battle-scenes and the advocate of the pleasures of the good life”.<sup>68</sup> This contradiction will be definitely overcome by Chrétien de Troyes, whose Gawain will be freed from the ties with the chronicle tradition to become a fully “courtly” figure, as we shall see later.

However, Wace’s depiction of Gawain will be of great importance for Chrétien to elaborate his own Gawain, because, as noted by Martin B. Schichtman, “Wace’s Gauvain, while living in a brutal world, is witty and charming, endowed with an urbane sophistication reflecting the attitude of the author’s twelfth-century, courtly Norman audience.”<sup>69</sup> Wace elaborates the figure of Gawain, hiding some of the warlike characteristics that were in Geoffrey and adding other aspects that could be more suitable to this audience, making of him a “more civilized French Knight”.<sup>70</sup> The Arthurian world becomes a mirror of the Norman aristocracy for which Wace wrote and which rewarded him for his *Brut* (“By 1169 Wace had been awarded the canonry at Bayeux”)<sup>71</sup> and Gawain is taken as the paradigm of perfect chivalry, characterizing him as both an “articulate spokesman” and the best example of the “Christian and courtly knight”<sup>72</sup> that the Arthurian court could offer, a model that could inspire one’s actions and behaviour. This is why the character of Gawain is given such importance in Wace, even as concerns his death: “having elevated Gawain to the status of a hero, Wace allows him to die like one”, and his death in the war against Mordred is mourned

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<sup>67</sup> Schichtman, Martin B., “Gawain in Wace and Lazamon”, in Laurie Finke and Martin B. Schichtman, eds, *Medieval Texts and Contemporary Readers*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987, p. 113.

<sup>68</sup> Busby, *Gauvain in Old French Literature*, p. 40.

<sup>69</sup> Schichtman, p. 108.

<sup>70</sup> Schichtman, p. 111.

<sup>71</sup> Schichtman, p. 109.

<sup>72</sup> Schichtman, p. 110.

by Arthur himself.<sup>73</sup> It is exactly this courtly Gawain that Chrétien de Troyes included among the protagonists of his romances.

Some scholars think that the addition of all these details to the figure of Gawain cannot be only the product of Wace's imagination, but must have derived from other sources such as the "Bretun fable" (Breton tales) that he mentions in the *Brut*.<sup>74</sup> The Celtic substrate of the Arthurian Legend seems thus to play an important role in the evolution of the character of Gawain also for what concerns medieval French poetry, even if it is hard to determine to what extent. The same can be said for the next important author that had to deal with Gawain, that is, Chrétien de Troyes, whose importance in the history of Arthurian literature can be summarized in this way:

the most important name in the history of Arthurian romance [...] for three main reasons: his merits as a poet and story-teller, his personal contribution to, and his influence upon, the *genre*.<sup>75</sup>

As had already happened with Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia*, his works (no longer a chronicle in Latin, but verse romances in French) contributed in developing a new Arthurian mythology, where the knights of the Round Table had no longer the status of god-like heroes but that of courteous knights. Chrétien did not invent the genre of romance, however he had a fundamental role in both the "elaboration of the Arthurian legend itself and in the establishment of the ideal form for the diffusion of that legend."<sup>76</sup> Chrétien took the material of his poems not only from sources such as Geoffrey and Wace, but also from Breton sources that drew directly upon Celtic material,<sup>77</sup> to the point that he has been called by scholars such as Jean Frappier "the Ovid of a disintegrating Celtic mythology."<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Shichtman, p. 113.

<sup>74</sup> Nitze, "The Character of Gauvain in the Romances of Chrétien de Troyes", p. 221.

<sup>75</sup> Jones, Gwyn, "Introduction", in Mason, Eugene, trans., *Arthurian Chronicles* London: Dent, 1970, p. vii.

<sup>76</sup> Lacy, Norris J., "Chrétien de Troyes", in Norris J. Lacy, ed., *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia*, New York: Garland, 1991, p. 88.

<sup>77</sup> Bromwich, Rachel, "First Transmission to England and France", in Bromwich, Rachel, A.O.H. Jarman, Brynley F. Roberts, eds., *The Arthur of the Welsh*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991, p. 283.

<sup>78</sup> Frappier, Jean, "Chrétien de Troyes", in Roger Sherman Loomis, ed., *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, A Collaborative History*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959, p. 164, in Bromwich, "First Transmission to England and France", p. 277.

Chrétien de Troyes wrote his five famous poems in the second half of the twelfth century (about 1159-91).<sup>79</sup> In these verse romances (*Erec et Enide*, *Cligés*, *Lancelot* or *Le Chevalier de la Charrete*, *Yvain* or *Le Chevalier au Lion* and *Perceval* or *Le Conte du Graal*) Gawain is always one of the main characters, but never the protagonist. It has been noted that in Chrétien de Troyes Gawain is always intended to be a “contrasting figure with whom the title-hero is compared or associated”,<sup>80</sup> probably because being considered the paragon of chivalry and universally known to audiences of the time it could be easier for Chrétien to build comparisons with him.<sup>81</sup> This could explain his presence in all the poems, and in particular in a consistent part of Chrétien’s last and unfinished poem, *Perceval*. Here Gawain has to face a series of “mostly trivial and frequently comical”<sup>82</sup> adventures that start abruptly without a coherent link with Perceval’s adventures, making some scholars think that this part was probably going to be developed by Chrétien into a separate poem before his death occurred,<sup>83</sup> while others even think that this part was not written by Chrétien at all.<sup>84</sup> However, it is generally believed that the Gawain section of the poem was intended by his author not as a separate romance but as a counterpoint to the Perceval part,<sup>85</sup> thus confirming the role of counterpart that Gawain has in Chrétien’s poems.

Even if Chrétien de Troyes never dedicated a full poem to Gawain - or, as it is stated in a later and anonymous poem, *Le Chevalier à l’épée*, he “onques de lui ne tint conte” -<sup>86</sup> he is certainly an important figure in Arthur’s court, who often supplies the strength and judgement that Arthur, often represented as a weak and unfit king, lacks.<sup>87</sup> Gawain’s

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<sup>79</sup> Norris, “Chrétien de Troyes”, p. 89.

<sup>80</sup> Nitze, p. 219.

<sup>81</sup> Busby, *Gauvain in Old French Literature*, p. 387.

<sup>82</sup> Norris, “Chrétien de Troyes”, p. 91.

<sup>83</sup> Norris, “Chrétien de Troyes”, p. 91.

<sup>84</sup> Nitze, p. 225.

<sup>85</sup> Norris, “Chrétien de Troyes”, p. 91.

<sup>86</sup> Johnston, R.C., and D.D.R. Owen, eds., *Two Old French Gauvain Romances*, Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1972, p. 31.

<sup>87</sup> Nitze, p. 222.

reputation is well supported by the way he is presented in the various poems; for example, in *Erec et Enide*, Gawain is described as the first among all the good knights:

Devant toz les buens chevaliers  
Doit ester Gauvains li premiers<sup>88</sup>

and his name is followed by those of all the other knights of the Round Table. In *Yvain* he is presented, in an equally flattering way, as the “sire” of all the “chevaliers”:

Chil qui des chevaliers fu sire  
Et qui seur tous fu renommés  
Doit bien estre soleil clamés.  
Pour monseigneur Gavain le di,  
que de lui est tout autressi  
Chevalerie enluminee  
Comme li solaus la matinee  
Espant ses rais, et clarté rent  
Par tout les lieux ou il respent.<sup>89</sup>

In this long and articulate simile, Gawain is not only presented as the most renowned among all the knights, but he is even compared to the sun, that enlightens with his rays the world in the same way as Gawain enlightens the whole order of knighthood with his reputation. This is probably the most elaborate and openly celebratory praise that Gawain has received until now among the authors we have been considering; one may even think that in this passage there is a reminiscence of Gawain’s ancient status as sun god coming from Celtic mythology. Moreover, the verb around which the simile is built, “enluminer”, is an interesting one, because in Old French it has not only the meaning of “giving light to”, but also that of “to decorate, to embellish”; the term was also applied to the action of decorating a manuscript with illuminations from the twelfth century.<sup>90</sup> In Middle English we find the verb “enluminen” that similarly has the meaning of “to shed light upon” both in a concrete and abstract meaning, and that of “to decorate a manuscript with letters of gold.”<sup>91</sup> By extension,

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<sup>88</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, *Erec et Enide, édition critique d'après le manuscrit B. N. fr. 1376*, translated by Jean-Marie Fritz, Paris: Librairie générale française, 1992, p. 148, ll. 1687-8.

<sup>89</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Chevalier au Lion, ou Le Roman d'Yvain, édition critique d'après le manuscrit B. N. fr. 1433*, translated by David F. Hult, Paris: Librairie générale française, 1994, p. 198, l. 2400.

<sup>90</sup> Dubois, Jean, Henri Mitterand, Albert Dauzat, *Dictionnaire étymologique et historique du français*, Paris: Larousse, 1993, p. 255.

<sup>91</sup> Kurath, Hans and Sherman M. Kuhn, eds., *Middle English Dictionary*, London: Geoffrey Cumberlege, 1952, p. 160.

the term has also the meaning of “to adorn or embellish with figures of speech or poetry” and “to make illustrious, glorious or famous”; we find it with this meaning in the *Clerk’s Tale* in reference to Francis Petrarch, “whos rethorike sweete/ Enlumyned al Ytaille of poetrie”.<sup>92</sup> The image we get of Gawain then is almost that of an ornament for Arthur’s court, a glowing sun that gives light and adorns the whole order of chivalry with his only presence.

Another characteristic attributed to Gawain by Chrétien de Troyes is his exemplary courtliness, that is particularly emphasized and admired by all the other knights of Arthur’s court like Erec, Cligés, Lancelot, Yvain, Perceval.<sup>93</sup> In *Erec et Enide* he is immediately established as King Arthur’s wise counsellor in the episode of the hunting of the White Stag, a custom that requires that he who succeeds in killing the White Stag will have to kiss the fairest girl at court. Arthur has decided to renew this custom, even if it may cause trouble among his men, since every knight would feel offended if his girl were not chosen as the fairest - and at the same time would be even more offended if she was kissed by another knight. Gawain warns Arthur against such trouble, but in vain: the king’s choice not to follow Gawain’s advice brings the court to internal fights which threaten its unity, and Arthur has to go back to Gawain and ask him for help.

One of the most evident characteristics that Chrétien attaches to Gawain is that of “sens”, that is, thoughtfulness.<sup>94</sup> he proves on various occasions to be not only wise and prudent, but also cold-minded and rational, for example in the *Lancelot*, where he is “the only knight with enough self-possession to propose a suitable course of action”<sup>95</sup> when Guinevere is abducted by Keu. This characteristic appears clearly in another famous episode of the *Lancelot*, the episode of the “charrette”, where Gawain’s use of “reason” prevents him from following Lancelot on the infamous cart that will bring him to Guinevere’s rescue. In this

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<sup>92</sup> Chaucer, Geoffrey, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson. Third ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987, p. 137, ll. 32-33.

<sup>93</sup> Kelly, Douglas, “Gauvain and ‘Fin’ Amors”, *Studies in Philology*, 67 (1970), pp. 454-5.

<sup>94</sup> Nitze, p. 223.

<sup>95</sup> Kelly, p. 455.

episode, Gawain represents the “mesure” (measure) against Lancelot’s “folie” (madness).<sup>96</sup> Another episode where Gawain proves a thoughtful knight is the “blood drops” episode in the *Perceval*, that we can summarize thus: Perceval sees three blood drops on the snow that remind him of his beloved Blanchifleur’s complexion and falls in a trance. He is found in this state by Sagremor, who challenges him and is defeated. Kay is also defeated by Perceval, but finally Gawain comes and resolves the situation not by means of violence, but using careful words to ask him what he is wondering about, and then showing understanding for what he says, thus proving that he is “an exemplar of perspicacity and judgment, a model of courtesy and understanding”.<sup>97</sup> We could easily conclude that in the hands of Chrétien de Troyes, Gawain becomes the image of the ideal courtly knight, a model of perfection for the upper class in medieval France;<sup>98</sup> Chrétien had thus an important role in establishing Gawain’s literary reputation: “it is Chrétien to whom we owe the literary conception of Gawain”, a conception that inspired future writers not only in France but also in England, namely in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.<sup>99</sup> However, we will see that things are not so clear as they seem.

If in general Chrétien’s depiction of Gawain is a positive one, there are also other aspects of the character that are more or less controversial, such as his representation as a lover, which represents a fundamental part of his “reputation” as a literary figure. The aspect of Gawain’s relationship with love seems to be of importance to Chrétien, who makes him the lover *par excellence*. He does not embody the model of the faithful lover as does Lancelot, who in the *Charette* proves to be a better knight than Gawain in rescuing his love Guenevere;<sup>100</sup> on the contrary, “unlike any other knight in Chrétien’s poems, one must speak

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<sup>96</sup> Busby, *Gauvain in Old French Literature*, p. 60.

<sup>97</sup> Nitze, p. 224.

<sup>98</sup> Nitze, p. 225.

<sup>99</sup> Nitze, p. 224.

<sup>100</sup> Kelly, p. 456.



of Gawain's loves in the plural",<sup>101</sup> for example Lunete in *Yvain*, or the King of Escavalon's sister and the Orgueilleuse of Logres in the *Conte du Graal* among many others. However this seems to be not a reputation to be proud of for Gawain: "Gauvain is less exemplary in love than in other fields".<sup>102</sup> Gawain proves to be "limited" in his qualities in comparison with other knights such as Lancelot (who surpasses him in his love for Guenevere), or Yvain, whose faithfulness for Lunete overshadows Gawain's proverbial lightness in love affairs; so even if he is not presented in negative terms, his qualities are not sufficient to prevent him from being diminished by such comparisons:<sup>103</sup> "We find in Gauvain's failures and shortcomings evidence for the superiority of the *chevalier-amant* over the knight pure and simple, that is, the qualitative supremacy of love –courtly love- over knighthood or courtliness alone."<sup>104</sup> The character of Gawain then is transformed in Chrétien de Troyes to fit into his vision of love and knighthood: the superiority of courtly love over mere chivalry.<sup>105</sup> Future authors will be keen on playing upon this reputation as a lover, as in the *Le Chevalier à l'épée*, as we shall see later.

Another controversial aspect that must be taken into account when considering Gawain's figure in Chrétien de Troyes is the author's growingly critical attitude toward this character in his five romances.<sup>106</sup> As we have seen, in Chrétien's first romances, *Erec et Enide* and *Cliges*, Gawain's reputation is entirely positive: he is "the yardstick against which the performance of other knights is measured."<sup>107</sup> However his attitude toward love in the following romances, *Lancelot* and *Yvain*, makes him a more controversial character. In general, in the poems of Chrétien de Troyes Gawain's love adventures are "almost without

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<sup>101</sup> Kelly, p. 455.

<sup>102</sup> Kelly, p. 457.

<sup>103</sup> Kelly, p.458.

<sup>104</sup> Kelly, p. 458.

<sup>105</sup> Kelly, p. 459.

<sup>106</sup> Busby, *Gauvain in Old French Literature*, p. 50.

<sup>107</sup> Busby, *Gauvain in Old French Literature*, p. 53.

exception superficial and physical”,<sup>108</sup> reinforcing the impression of Gawain’s deplorable lack of seriousness when dealing with love. Moreover, we have seen that in *Lancelot* he is taken as a counterpart to Lancelot’s “mad”, but admirable love for Guinevere, while in *Yvain* he arrives to the point of advising the protagonist against staying at home with his legitimate wife to pursue glory in tournaments, thus showing that he doesn’t believe at all in faithfulness and conjugal love. In this way, he becomes quite a superficial character, and he seems to lack “a sense of the potential depth of human love.”<sup>109</sup> In *Lancelot* and *Yvain* then, the comparison with the poems’ main hero puts Gawain in a negative light. The same happens in Chrétien’s last poem, *Perceval*, that is also his most controversial work, as it is unfinished. In this poem Gawain is once again drawn into a comparison with the main hero, but the nature of such comparison is not entirely clear;<sup>110</sup> Busby however agrees with Jean Frappier in believing that Gawain’s performance in the poem was intended to be surpassed by that of Perceval,<sup>111</sup> since the adventures he has to face in the second section of the poem are all negative and even humiliating.<sup>112</sup> The fact that Gawain had embodied in Chrétien’s previous romances the model of the perfect knight could make us think that Chrétien is criticizing through this character the whole chivalric culture, or at least “shedding some doubt [...] on the notion of chivalric perfectibility as personified by Gauvain.”<sup>113</sup> As Busby notes,

everything supports the idea that Chrétien was intent on having Perceval surpass the worldly chivalry of Gauvain and have him finally succeed in the spiritual adventure of the Grail. There are admittedly positive aspects to Gauvain’s character and adventures, but all he achieves is as a result of his physical prowess, not of any spiritual quality he may possess. The qualities – vices and virtues- that Gauvain embodies are those of the Arthurian court and of the courtly ethos in general. He illustrates both its potentials and its limitations, whilst remaining essentially admirable.<sup>114</sup>

As had already happened in *Wace* then we can see how Gawain’s figure changes in the hands of the authors who exploited him to convey a certain idea of chivalry. Chrétien’s

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<sup>108</sup> Busby, *Gauvain in Old French Literature*, p. 394.

<sup>109</sup> Busby, *Gauvain in Old French Literature*, p. 70.

<sup>110</sup> Busby, *Gauvain in Old French Literature*, p. 83.

<sup>111</sup> Busby, *Gauvain in Old French Literature*, p. 100.

<sup>112</sup> Busby, *Gauvain in Old French Literature*, p. 142.

<sup>113</sup> Johnston and Owen, p.6.

<sup>114</sup> Busby, *Gauvain in Old French Literature*, p. 142.

depiction of Gawain however was particularly influent for the future writers who had to deal with this character, but at the same time, it was also an ambiguous one: was Gawain a perfect knight as in *Erec et Enide*, or was he a limited knight, destined to be surpassed by the other knights of the court in matters of love and spirituality? The fact that *Perceval* ends abruptly without giving a proper end to Gawain's adventures surely played an important part in building an ambiguous reputation; but it was also Chrétien's ambivalent attitude toward Gawain, "characterised by an undoubted admiration of his virtues and a suspicion as to his limitations"<sup>115</sup> to make of Gawain such a controversial character in the works that followed Chrétien's great romances.

The ambiguity of Gawain's figure in Chrétien de Troyes brought later authors in Old French literature to give often a comical, even burlesque portrait of him,<sup>116</sup> as in two anonymous romances that are devoted to him, *Le Chevalier à l'épée* and *La Mule sans frein*, both written in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century.<sup>117</sup> These poems are generally attributed to an unknown poet who calls himself "Paiens de Maisières" - with a pun on Chrétien's name, "Pagan" against "Christian" - that some believe to be Chrétien himself.<sup>118</sup> In any case the romances show to have a perfect knowledge of the character of Gawain as depicted in Chrétien de Troyes.<sup>119</sup> The fact that he was the protagonist of such poems could be in fact at the same time a sign of his popularity among the French audience of romance and of his reputation as a far from faultless character. For example in *Le Chevalier à l'épée*, Gawain is presented as a victorious knight<sup>120</sup> and as the prototype of the ladies' man,<sup>121</sup> but the overall tone of the poem is such that it leaves no doubt on its derisory intentions, including

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<sup>115</sup> Busby, *Gauvain in Old French Literature*, p. 90.

<sup>116</sup> Busby, "Gawain", p. 178.

<sup>117</sup> Johnston and Owen, p. 2.

<sup>118</sup> Johnston and Owen, p.7

<sup>119</sup> Johnston and Owen, p.7.

<sup>120</sup> Johnston and Owen, p.3.

<sup>121</sup> Johnston and Owen, , p.5.

the poem in a tradition of “affectionate burlesquing of Gauvain”<sup>122</sup> that continues also in other poems, like *La Mule sans frein*, where Gawain is the main character, but also in other texts in which he appears, like the thirteenth-century text *La Vengeance Raguidel*.<sup>123</sup> This last text is clearly an “anti-Gauvain parody”, where the parody is built upon Gawain’s reputation as a lover and his success with women.<sup>124</sup>

Later authors in French medieval literature did not limit themselves to making fun of Gawain; in some cases they did not hesitate in assigning to him a totally negative role, as it happens in the *Queste del Saint Graal*, one of the five prose romances that compose the Vulgate cycle (ca.1215-1235),<sup>125</sup> where he is depicted as a “hardened and unrepentant sinner”,<sup>126</sup> or in the Prose *Tristan*, an extremely popular thirteenth century text strongly influenced by the Vulgate,<sup>127</sup> where he even becomes a “murderous villain”.<sup>128</sup> Busby suggests that this change in the attitude toward Gawain is probably due “to a change in the spiritual climate in France around the turn of the century”,<sup>129</sup> that caused a harder judgment on Gawain’s “spiritual inadequacy” compared to other knights such as Perceval, especially in those texts where the quest for the Holy Grail is at the centre.<sup>130</sup>

In conclusion, even if Gawain in Old French literature was not an entirely positive figure, it may have been exactly this “flexible, nonhero (but with heroic potential) status that rendered the figure of Gawain so serviceable”,<sup>131</sup> making him a highly malleable and interesting character in the hands of later authors, who had a whole range of roles from which

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<sup>122</sup> Johnston and Owen, p.5.

<sup>123</sup> Busby, “Gawain”, p. 178.

<sup>124</sup> Busby, “*La Vengeance Raguidel*”, in Norris J. Lacy, ed., *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia*, New York: Garland, 1991, p. 487.

<sup>125</sup> Burns, E. Jane, “Vulgate Cycle”, in Norris J. Lacy, ed., *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia*, New York: Garland, 1991, p. 497.

<sup>126</sup> Busby, “Gawain”, p. 178.

<sup>127</sup> Busby, “Prose *Tristan*”, in Norris J. Lacy, ed., *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia*, New York: Garland, 1991, p. 374.

<sup>128</sup> Busby, “Gawain”, p. 178.

<sup>129</sup> Busby, *Gauvain in Old French Literature*, p. 401.

<sup>130</sup> Busby, *Gauvain in Old French Literature*, p. 401.

<sup>131</sup> Busby, “Gawain”, p. 179.

they could draw inspiration when including Gawain in their narratives, from the exemplary knight to the disinhibited lover, to the merciless villain. In particular we will see in the next section how the complexity of this character was echoed in different and contrasting ways in various European traditions other than the French one, and these traditions contributed in enriching the literary biography of Gawain.

### 1.3 Gawain in the Thirteenth Century

In the previous section we have touched on the development of Arthurian romance in France after Chrétien de Troyes, whose literary career ended in the last decade of the twelfth century.<sup>132</sup> In the following century, French Arthurian literature developed into two main groups of literary works: on the one hand, the great prose cycles, such as the Vulgate Cycle and the Post-Vulgate Cycle; on the other hand, a parallel flourishing of separate romances “couched in unapologetic verse”<sup>133</sup> dedicated to the adventures of individual knights of the Round Table, and in particular to those of Gawain.<sup>134</sup> These romances are also known as the “epigonal romances” because they take Chrétien’s romances as their declared model,<sup>135</sup> and include such verse romances as *Le Chevalier à l’épée* and *La Mule sans frein*<sup>136</sup> that we have already mentioned in the previous section. These early romances about Gawain are characterized by a burlesque tone and by a representation of the knight as a lover and seducer.<sup>137</sup>

In various prose romances that belong to the post-Chrétien cycles, on the contrary, Gawain is portrayed in a much darker way: he is no longer the almost perfect flower of

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<sup>132</sup> Lacy, J. Norris, “Chrétien de Troyes”, p. 89.

<sup>133</sup> Taylor, Jane H. M., “The Thirteenth-Century Arthur”, in Elizabeth Archibald and Ad Putter, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 65.

<sup>134</sup> Taylor, p. 65.

<sup>135</sup> Taylor, p. 65.

<sup>136</sup> Taylor, p. 65.

<sup>137</sup> Taylor, p. 65.

chivalry that we have seen in twelfth-century works such as Wace's *Brut* and Chrétien's *Erec et Enide*, but becomes a real villain, cruel and treacherous, the worst knight to be found in Arthur's court.<sup>138</sup> The phenomenon of Gawain's "epic degeneration" in the thirteenth-century French prose romances can be summarized thus:

The Vulgate Cycle condemns Gauvain on religious grounds; the Prose *Tristan*, on the other hand, taking up the theme of Gauvain's *démésure* first introduced in the *Mort Artu*, makes him into a villain for the benefit of the title hero; the *Suite du Merlin* and the longer romance of which it forms part takes over from the prose *Tristan* the conception of a treacherous and vindictive knight.<sup>139</sup>

The negative characterization of Gawain in these romances will be of great importance in the last section of this chapter, where we will see how Sir Thomas Malory used these texts to build up his own Gawain.

However, the thirteenth-century Gawain is not only the object of burlesque romances or the embodiment of evil in the prose cycles, but is also at the centre of tales concerning his youth that seem to attempt a partial restoration of his heroic status.<sup>140</sup> An example of this tendency is the fragmentary poem *Les Enfances Gauvain* (c.1230),<sup>141</sup> a tale that follows the first years of Gawain's life, and of which unfortunately we only have two fragments (712 lines)<sup>142</sup> that tell us about Gawain's exploits, focusing on his "rise to chivalric excellence."<sup>143</sup> Another example is that of a prose romance in Latin, the *De Ortu Waluuanii Nepotis Arturi*, probably contemporary to *Les Enfances Gauvain* and entirely dedicated to Gawain's youth and early adventures; it is interesting to note that the only surviving manuscript containing this prose "was apparently copied in England in the fourteenth century".<sup>144</sup> This prose tells us about his birth as the illegitimate son of Anna, Arthur's sister, and his training in arms by the

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<sup>138</sup> Bogdanow, Fanny, "The Character of Gauvain in the Thirteenth-Century Prose Romances", *Medium Aevum*, 27 (1958), p. 154.

<sup>139</sup> Bogdanow, p.161.

<sup>140</sup> Taylor, p. 65.

<sup>141</sup> Taylor, p. 65.

<sup>142</sup> Busby, Keith, "Les Enfances Gauvain", in Norris J. Lacy, ed., *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia*, New York: Garland, 1991, p. 133.

<sup>143</sup> Taylor, p. 65.

<sup>144</sup> Hahn, Thomas, ed., *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995, p.2.

emperor of Rome: however, Gawain is totally unaware of his noble origins.<sup>145</sup> The story then goes on with Gawain's first adventures and the revelation of his true identity by Arthur to reward him for his help in battle.<sup>146</sup> *De Ortu Waluuanii* was attributed by John Bale to the Abbot of Mont Saint Michel, Robert of Torigni,<sup>147</sup> who lived in the second half of the twelfth century, but this attribution has been rejected by scholars such as J. Douglas Bruce who ascribed it to the second quarter of the thirteenth century or even later.<sup>148</sup> In the romance, Gawain is called "miles cum tunica armature", the Knight of the Surcoat. Sir Frederic Madden noted that this romance is quite remarkable for its being "quite distinct from the established fictions of the Round Table", adding that we cannot be sure whether it derived "from floating Celtic traditions or from an Anglo-Norman original".<sup>149</sup> Bruce argues that there must have been a French source from which both *De Ortu Waluuanii* and *Les Enfances Gauvain* derive.<sup>150</sup>

Sketches of Gawain's youth were also in the main source for Arthurian romances, the *Historia Regum Britanniae*, where we are told about his education in Rome provided by Pope Sulpicius, a fictional pope. A passage about Gawain's youth can be found also in Wace's *Brut*, and in the *Perlesvaus*, a French prose probably composed in the first decade of the thirteenth century,<sup>151</sup> where we find for the first time a hint to Gawain's illegitimacy, a detail that will appear also in *Les Enfances Gauvain* and in *De Ortu Waluuanii*.<sup>152</sup> What Keith Busby says about these accounts of Gawain's youth - "the bringing up of the young knight in the maternal uncle's household recurs frequently in the romances, and can be traced back to

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<sup>145</sup> Day, Mildred Leake, "De Ortu Waluuanii Nepotis Arturi", in Norris J. Lacy, ed., *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia*, New York: Garland, 1991, p. 112.

<sup>146</sup> Day, p. 112.

<sup>147</sup> Bruce, J. Douglas, ed., *Historia Meriadoci and De Ortu Waluuanii, Two Arthurian Romances of the Thirteenth Century in Latin Prose*, Baltimore: the John Hopkins Press, 1913, p. v.

<sup>148</sup> Bruce, *Historia Meriadoci and De Ortu Waluuanii*, p. xxiv.

<sup>149</sup> Madden, Frederic, *Syr Gawayne: A Collection of Ancient Romance-Poems by Scottish and English Authors Relating to that Celebrated Knight of the Round Table*, London, Richard & John E. Taylor:1939, p. xxxiii, in Bruce, J. Douglas, *Historia Meriadoci and De Ortu Waluuanii*, p. xxxvi.

<sup>150</sup> Bruce, *Historia Meriadoci and De Ortu Waluuanii*, p. lii.

<sup>151</sup> Busby, *Gauvain in Old French Literature*, p. 33.

<sup>152</sup> Busby, *Gauvain in Old French Literature*, p. 231.

Celtic sources”<sup>153</sup> seems to be confirmed by a study made by Raymond Thompson, who analyzed the pattern of the tales of Gawain’s youth and related it to the description of the birth of heroes.

The account of Gawain’s youth – as told in *De Ortu Waluuanii*, *Perlesvaus* and *Les Enfances Gauvain* - seems to be of crucial importance in the whole of the Arthurian tradition because it provides a link with the earlier stages of its development: “The story of Gawain's birth shares many characteristics with similar stories told of culture heroes from widely-scattered lands, and, like these, belongs properly to the realm of mythology rather than romance.”<sup>154</sup> The description of Gawain’s youth then would be a relic of a “more primitive concept of heroism” that we do not usually find in medieval romances.<sup>155</sup> The basic pattern of the story remains substantially unchanged in the three works cited and can be summarized thus:

Gawain is born out of wedlock from a union between Loth and Arthur's sister. To conceal the fact of his birth, the mother arranges for the disposal of the child. Together with certain precious articles and a letter indicating his noble origin, the infant is placed in a cradle and comes into the keeping of a man of lowly station. Years later the hero is brought to Rome by his guardian, and there is taken into the custody of the pope or emperor, who completes his education. He is eventually knighted and earns great renown before winning the recognition of his parents and uncle, King Arthur.<sup>156</sup>

The proof of the fact that the account of Gawain’s youth is of a more ancient origin would be a hidden hostility with his uncle Arthur,<sup>157</sup> a hostility that emerges particularly in an episode of *De Ortu Waluuanii*, where the encounter between nephew and uncle – who does not know about his nephew’s real identity – is particularly violent, since Arthur is defeated by Gawain who proves to be a better knight than the king; even when Gawain has been recognized, he meets difficulties at becoming part of the Round Table, because Arthur wants another proof of his valour.<sup>158</sup> Thompson notes that from these episodes a “jealous antagonism” emerges

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<sup>153</sup> Busby, *Gauvain in Old French Literature*, p. 33.

<sup>154</sup> Thompson, Raymond H., “The Impact of a Mythological Pattern upon Arthurian Tradition in Accounts of the Birth of Gawain”, *Folklore*, 85 (1974), p.113.

<sup>155</sup> Thompson, p. 113.

<sup>156</sup> Thompson, p.114.

<sup>157</sup> Thompson, p. 113.

<sup>158</sup> Thompson, p. 117.



between Gawain and Arthur, and attributes it to a feature of the original legend of Gawain's youth, that cannot be entirely suppressed by the attempts made by the author of the Latin romance to diminish it by describing Arthur's delight at knowing about his nephew's identity.<sup>159</sup> To explain such hostility he relies upon a study by Otto Rank who analyzed tales about the birth of heroes, outlining a basic script that can be applied also to Gawain's story.<sup>160</sup> The hostility would thus be explained by an almost Freudian conflict between the hero and the monarch-father figure: "As the pattern established by Rank shows, some measure of conflict between the hero and king is essential to the birth tale. The hero must first punish his parents for the initial rejection, then win their recognition of the rights that are truly his",<sup>161</sup> with the difference that the father is in the case of Gawain embodied by the powerful figure of his uncle Arthur. An interesting aspect of the Gawain legend can thus be recognized in those tales dealing with his youth, that seems to be an important element in the whole of the Arthurian cycle.

Another attempt to restore Gawain's reputation or at least to portray him in a positive way was made by a German poet, Heinrich von dem Türlin, who dedicated to Gawain a verse romance in the first half of the thirteenth century, the *Diu Crône* (The Crown). The poet came probably from an Alpine region of Austria but we do not know much about him.<sup>162</sup> What is relevant to us about this German romance is the fact that Gawain (here called *Gawein*) is the main protagonist of all the adventures told in the poem: "*Diu Crône* is essentially a biographical romance about Gawein",<sup>163</sup> who proves to be an excellent knight in all the tests he has to face.<sup>164</sup> He replaces Lancelot in the rescue of Guinevere<sup>165</sup> and succeeds even in the quest for the Grail - replacing Perceval in the role that was attributed to him by

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<sup>159</sup> Thompson, p. 118.

<sup>160</sup> Thompson, p. 114.

<sup>161</sup> Thompson, p. 118.

<sup>162</sup> Andersen, Elizabeth, "Heinrich von dem Türlin's *Diu Crône* and the Prose Lancelot: An Intertextual Study", *Arthurian Literature*, 7 (1987), p. 26.

<sup>163</sup> Andersen, p. 41.

<sup>164</sup> Andersen, p. 31.

<sup>165</sup> Andersen, p. 44.

Chrétien de Troyes in the *Queste du Graal* and ensuring with this act the survival of Arthur's court.<sup>166</sup> Gawain is thus given primary importance in this text, and his portrayal in the romance absorbs the adventures and features of other Arthurian characters – who are pushed to the background by his presence - probably as a consequence of the eclectic use of numerous literary sources made by the author: “the concentration of motifs, episodes and characteristics around the figure of Gawain in *Diu Crône* weakens the individuality of the heroes of other romances [...] and they are clearly subordinated to Gawain.”<sup>167</sup> This attribution of the features traditionally belonging to characters such as Lancelot, Perceval and Iwain from them to Gawain has as a consequence the enhancement of his “status as the outstanding representative and defender of the Arthurian world”.<sup>168</sup> For this reason, Gawain is in Heinrich's tale something more than a simply literary character, for he becomes the very emblem of chivalry, the perfect knight that cannot fail and the defender of chivalric values: “Gawain is the model of all chivalric virtues, the favorite of Lady Fortune, successful in all his endeavors like the hero of fairy tales who undergoes no evolution or crisis.”<sup>169</sup>

The importance given to Gawain in this romance is not at all casual, because as Elizabeth Andersen notes, “In the *Queste del Saint Graal* Gauvain is too secular a knight to be successful in the religious quest. By contrast, it is precisely the secular tradition of Arthurian chivalry which Heinrich champions in *Diu Crône*.”<sup>170</sup> Heinrich's intent is that of preserving Arthurian chivalry against the hidden menace to the integrity of the Arthurian world represented by Lancelot's *courtois* love for Guinevere, a love that makes of him the best knight in the world but that is guilty of treason against Arthur,<sup>171</sup> and of overcoming this threat to the Arthurian world exactly “by making of Gawain, the traditional exemplar and

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<sup>166</sup> Andersen, p. 31.

<sup>167</sup> Andersen, p. 38.

<sup>168</sup> Gürtler, Karin R., “Heinrich von dem Türlin”, in Norris J. Lacy, ed., *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia*, New York: Garland, 1991, p. 228.

<sup>169</sup> Gürtler, p. 228.

<sup>170</sup> Andersen, p. 48.

<sup>171</sup> Andersen, p. 46.

representative of Arthurian chivalry, the hero knight”<sup>172</sup>, thus ensuring the survival of a certain kind of Arthurian chivalry, one that is more traditional and closer to the earlier stages of the Arthurian legend.

To conclude this section dedicated to the works (not written in England) where Gawain has a primary role we must remember a Middle Dutch text where Gawain has once again the main role, the *Roman van Walewein*. In general, Gawain enjoyed high popularity in Middle Dutch literature, where a special form of his name, Walewein, appeared quite early, and where he was even named *der avonturen father* (“the father of adventures”).<sup>173</sup> The *Roman van Walewein* was written by two Flemish poets, Penninc and Pieter Vostaert, in the second half of the thirteenth century (c. 1260) and deals with Walewein’s adventures in the quest for the Floating Chessboard, a fantastic object that Arthur wants and that Gawain acquires after a series of complex but successful adventures.<sup>174</sup> The pattern of the story is basically that of a common popular story, a fairy tale that was later told also by the Grimm brothers.<sup>175</sup> The fact that this work - together with *Diu Crône* - was dedicated to Gawain, and that his role in the poem was completely positive, attests to the affection that many thirteenth-century romances outside France have for this hero.<sup>176</sup> We will see in the next section how the reputation of Gawain developed in England in tales of various provenance.

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<sup>172</sup> Andersen, p. 48.

<sup>173</sup> Busby, Keith, “Gawain”, 1991, p. 178.

<sup>174</sup> Besamusca, Bart, “Penninc and Pieter Vostaert”, in Norris J. Lacy, ed., *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia*, New York: Garland, 1991, p. 355.

<sup>175</sup> Ker, William Paton, “The Roman van Walewein”, *Folklore*, 5 (1894), p. 121.

<sup>176</sup> Taylor, p. 66.

## 1.4 Gawain, *the English Knight*

Until now we have been concerned mainly with works that were produced outside medieval England - with the exception of the *Historia Regum Britanniae*, whose language was Latin - and in particular in France, even though at the basis of tales about Arthur there was the so-called “matter of Britain.” We have to wait for the fourteenth century to see a consistent production of Arthurian texts in English; however, the flourishing of French Arthurian romance had echoes also in thirteenth-century England, where Wace’s *Le Roman de Brut* was translated from French and arranged into English alliterative verse in the poem known as Layamon’s *Brut*.<sup>177</sup> This work, that was produced probably before 1207 by a priest of Ernleye on the Severn,<sup>178</sup> is surely of importance to us, since it “marks the first occurrence of the Arthurian story in English”;<sup>179</sup> it is also one of the first major examples of literature in Middle English.<sup>180</sup> The use of alliterative verse was to be found later in other Arthurian works produced in English, such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the alliterative *Morte Arthure*,<sup>181</sup> and this poem can be considered a forerunner of the alliterative revival of the fourteenth century to which these works belong.<sup>182</sup> Layamon was generally faithful in following Wace’s account of Arthur’s story, however he did not simply translate the French text and arrange it in alliterative verse, but changed deeply the system of values behind the work: “While one thinks of Wace’s adaptation of Geoffrey of Monmouth as a move toward courtly romance, one thinks of Layamon’s adaptation of Wace as a move back to a more heroic age”.<sup>183</sup> Also the style of the work is very distant from the refined courtly verses of

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<sup>177</sup> Kennedy E. Donald, “Layamon”, in Norris J. Lacy, ed., *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia*, New York: Garland, 1991, p. 274.

<sup>178</sup> Brook, G. L., ed., *Selections from Layamon’s Brut*, Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1983, p. vii.

<sup>179</sup> Kennedy, p. 274.

<sup>180</sup> Barron, Le Saux, and Johnson, “Dynastic Chronicles”, p. 22.

<sup>181</sup> Kennedy, p. 274.

<sup>182</sup> Barron, Le Saux, Johnson, “Dynastic Chronicles”, p. 22.

<sup>183</sup> Kennedy, “Layamon”, p. 274.

Wace, and much closer to that of epic.<sup>184</sup> In Layamon, then, the interest in things such as love and chivalry disappears, and is replaced by vivid descriptions of brutal episodes of war and violence.<sup>185</sup> What is interesting for us to see is how the depiction of Gawain, who is one of the protagonists of Layamon's *Brut* (indeed, he sometimes takes the role of main character, as in Arthur's campaigns against Rome, where "the focus is on Gawain rather than on the king himself")<sup>186</sup> is influenced by this "step back"<sup>186</sup> toward the heroic and warlike world that we have found in Geoffrey of Monmouth – a very different setting then from Wace's and Chretien's courtly *milieu*.

This shift toward the epic can be seen clearly if we compare the same scene in Wace's *Roman de Brut* and in Layamon's *Brut*, for example the already cited exchange between Gawain and the knight Cador. In Wace, the passage was nearly a declaration of intentions of chivalric ethics: peace was praised by Gawain-Gauvain as a time when knights can dedicate their time to love and knightly deeds; the exchange between the two knights is seen more as an exercise in eloquence than as a real argument, and their talking is described as almost a joking among the knights while they are going up the stairs of a tower.<sup>187</sup> In Layamon every reference to joking and chatting is removed:

First the tower itself is characterized – 'an ancient stonework, stout men wrought it' (M 24885) – and this Beowulfian glance at a remoter past alters, as it were, the whole lighting of the passage. There is nothing about love. Cador seriously denounces idleness; Gawain utters weighty praise of peace. There is a real strife or *flit* between them, and Arthur, who knows the swords might be out any minute, quells it sternly (M 24966-72). Not a trace of the Norman Gaiety remains.<sup>188</sup>

If we look closer at Gawain's reply, we can see a complete lack of interest in Layamon in the courtly side of the character, called Walwein in Layamon's text. His reply sounds thus:

That heard Walwein, who was Arthur's relative, and angered him much with Cador, who said these words; and thus answered Walwein the good: 'Cadon, thou art a powerful man; thy counsels are not good; for good is peace and good is amity, whoso freely therewith holdeth, and God himself it made,

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<sup>184</sup> Brook, p. viii.

<sup>185</sup> Kennedy, pp. 274 – 275.

<sup>186</sup> Barron, Le Saux, Johnson, "Dynastic Chronicles", p. 24.

<sup>187</sup> Brook, p. ix.

<sup>188</sup> Brook, p. ix.

through his divinity; for peace maketh a good man work good works, for all men are the better, and the land is the merrier'.<sup>189</sup>

In Gawain's speech as reported by Layamon, there is no reference at all to chivalry and "chevaleries", but peace is praised only because it can make men become better (clearly in a religious perspective) and act in a good way. This difference in Gawain's characterization is a result of the different mood of the two poems, because while in Wace we were facing an openly lay and mundane work directed to a specific audience, the Norman aristocracy, in Layamon we have the work of a cleric who has different goals and a different audience: "The Brut contains none of the celebration of courtly values so central to Wace's work, primarily because these values would have close associations with French (especially Norman) culture."<sup>190</sup> Layamon's audience is by no means that of French-speaking courtiers, but that of a people that had been conquered by Normans; moreover the author is a priest and stresses the religious idea of the smallness of men – every man, even Arthur and Gawain - in a world that is only transitory.<sup>191</sup> This attitude is obviously reflected in the characters of the poem and, for what concerns us, in Gawain: "Wace depicts Gawain as a good-humored young man, Layamon focuses on the solemn side of his personality".<sup>192</sup> We have already seen how this difference in Gawain's characterization is evident in the exchange with Cador, where Gawain becomes even "the voice of religious pacifism in an attempt to strengthen social bonds".<sup>193</sup> To sum up, in Layamon, Gawain is no longer the protagonist of a romance, but that of an Anglo-Saxon epic: "Gawain soon assumes the role of the traditional Anglo-Saxon warrior; he becomes like Cador, and his pacifism gives way to rash, proud, brutal action."<sup>194</sup> The ambiguity of the French Gauvain – especially that of Chrétien and his continuators -

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<sup>189</sup> Layamon, *Brut*, in Mason, p. 230.

<sup>190</sup> Schictman, p. 114.

<sup>191</sup> Schictman, pp. 114-115.

<sup>192</sup> Schictman, p. 115.

<sup>193</sup> Schictman, p. 115.

<sup>194</sup> Schictman, p. 115.

completely disappears in the hands of Layamon, and the character is restored in his original integrity and in his heroic status – that of Geoffrey of Monmouth.

Moreover, Layamon enriched the picture of Gawain adding details to his personal story and his relationship with the other characters. This can be seen in particular in Layamon's interesting exploration of the Gawain-Mordred relationship: "Perhaps Layamon's most significant addition to Gawain's characterization is his strengthening of the bond between the knight and his evil brother, Mordred."<sup>195</sup> Gawain is represented as a character torn by an internal strife between his loyalty to Arthur and that to his evil brother, Mordred, to whom he seems to be particularly tied, even "burdened" by his presence, as in the account of Gawain's birth, where Layamon foretells Mordred's future misdeeds.<sup>196</sup> This represents also an innovation added by Layamon compared to Wace's text, and he is the "first writer to stress Gawain's family ties".<sup>197</sup> Another example of Layamon's additions in relation to Gawain is the allegorical dream that Arthur has one night, and that we can summarize thus: Arthur is sitting in a hall, with Gawain – armed with Arthur's sword- on his side; Mordred arrives, destroys Arthur's hall and breaks Gawain's arms. In the dream, Gawain is identified as the one who protects Arthur from the destruction brought about by Mordred's treason; however, Gawain's failures are also being foreseen in this dream, since he will not be able to detect in time the danger represented by his brother and protect Arthur from the inevitable destruction of his kingdom.<sup>198</sup>

Martin B. Schichtman explains this dark depiction of Gawain's family ties with Mordred with Layamon's overall view of history as hopeless and treacherous to peoples like the English who had been defeated and ruled by the Norman for 150 years at his time, thus reinforcing the message that God is the only source of hope and salvation: "For Layamon,

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<sup>195</sup> Schichtman, p. 116.

<sup>196</sup> Schichtman, p. 116.

<sup>197</sup> Schichtman, p. 117.

<sup>198</sup> Schichtman, p. 118.

living in Norman-occupied Britain, history was a means of showing his audience the way to God.”<sup>199</sup> Gawain is thus taken by Layamon as the symbol of a doomed Arthurian society, that is too committed to earthly things to be saved from the tragic course of history represented by Mordred;<sup>200</sup> he becomes in his hands an almost tragic figure and a crucial element in his account of Arthur’s story. The fact that he added details to his story, diverging from the French source, and that he gave so much prominence to Gawain’s role in the narrative confirms the impression that Gawain’s character was of importance to Layamon; he is transformed, deprived of all the courtly features that had been attributed to him by Wace and brought back to his original heroic status, but at the same time renewed in his image and made more sympathetic to an English audience of the time, by turning into a more humane figure: not the faultless warrior of epic tales nor the perfect courtier of Wace, but a fallible warrior who does his best to serve his king but is all the same defeated by the inevitability of history’s progression.

We can also wonder whether the additions to Wace made by Layamon were all of his invention or taken from other sources. In the Prologue to his poem, Layamon claims to have used three different sources: Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*, Wace’s *Roman de Brut* and what he calls a “book of St Albin and Austin” that has not been clearly identified.<sup>201</sup> However, apart from these declared sources – of which the most exploited is surely Wace’s *Brut* –<sup>202</sup> he probably used also Welsh sources, “bits of Welsh tradition which its author, who dwelt near the border of Wales, either heard directly from his Welsh-speaking neighbors or got at second hand from his English parishioners, among whom legends of Welsh origin were doubtless popular.”<sup>203</sup> This is attested for example by the fact that Layamon changes in his poem the names of the characters making them closer to the Welsh

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<sup>199</sup> Schictman, pp. 118-119.

<sup>200</sup> Schictman, p. 118.

<sup>201</sup> Barron , Le Saux, Johnson, “Dynastic Chronicles”, p. 23.

<sup>202</sup> Barron , Le Saux, Johnson, “Dynastic Chronicles”, p. 24.

<sup>203</sup> Brown, Arthur C.L., “Welsh Traditions in Layamon’s Brut”, *Modern Philology*, 1 (1903), p. 95.



form of the same names;<sup>204</sup> we can wonder whether the additions he made to Gawain's figure derived from a Welsh influence or were only produced by his imagination.

Notwithstanding Layamon's quite original reworking of Wace's poem, in thirteenth-century England Arthurian romance was more a "fashionable import"<sup>205</sup> from the continent than the product of local writers who felt the Arthurian material to be strongly tied to their land. The production of Arthurian romances in England started to become more consistent in the fourteenth century, when

the appearance of English Arthurian literature accompanies the gathering strength of English as a literary language and the growing sense of national identity most sharply felt in relation to France. From the fourteenth century onwards French romance is re-interpreted for an English audience for whom Arthurian material is inescapably historic and iconic.<sup>206</sup>

There is of course a preference for English places known to the readers to set the adventures of the various knights, that are chosen preferably among the "local" heroes such as Perceval of Wales, Tristram of Cornwall and of course, Gawain of Galloway or Orkney.<sup>207</sup>

Gawain becomes indeed from the fourteenth century onwards the protagonist of a number of chivalric and folk romances<sup>208</sup> (a definition of these genres will be proposed in the next chapter, devoted in detail to these romances), among which we find what is probably the most famous work of the medieval English Renaissance, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, where he is the protagonist and main hero of the narrative, "and in the English corpus he fills this role more often than any other Arthurian knight."<sup>209</sup> Such corpus of romances featuring Gawain as the main protagonist is composed of the following works: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (late fourteenth century), *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle* (c. 1400), *The Avowyng of Arthur* (composed between 1375 and 1475), *The Awntyrs off Arthur* (early

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<sup>204</sup> Brown, p. 97.

<sup>205</sup> Batt, Catherine, and Rosalind Field, "The Romance Tradition", in W.J.R. Barron, ed., *The Arthur of the English, the Arthurian Legend in Medieval English Life and Literature*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001, p. 67.

<sup>206</sup> Batt and Field, "The Romance Tradition", p. 69.

<sup>207</sup> Batt and Field, "The Romance Tradition", p. 70.

<sup>208</sup> Mills, Maldwyn, Elizabeth Williams, Flora Alexander, Rosamund Allen and W.R.J. Barron, "Chivalric Romance", in W.J.R. Barron, ed., *The Arthur of the English, the Arthurian Legend in Medieval English Life and Literature*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001, p. 114.

<sup>209</sup> Mills, Williams, Alexander, Allen and Barron, "Chivalric Romance", p. 114.

fifteenth century), *The Greene Knight* and *The Jeaste of Sir Gawain* (late fifteenth century), *The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawain* (end of the fifteenth century), *The Carle of Carlisle*, *The Turke and Sir Gawain*, *The Weddyng of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell*, (c.1500), and the late ballads *King Arthur and King Cornwall* and *The Marriage of Sir Gawain* that can be found in the sixteenth-century manuscript called “Percy Folio”.<sup>210</sup> All these Gawain romances represented a consistent part of fifteenth-century England Arthurian reading, forming a group of tales that definitely diverge from the French tradition of an amoral and even criminal Gawain – the tradition Malory will follow,<sup>211</sup> as we shall see later. In all these romances indeed, the portrayal of Gawain is overwhelmingly positive, as he is “almost always successful in combat, and both moderate in himself and a moderating influence upon others.”<sup>212</sup> English poets decided to reject the “epic degeneration” that, as we have seen, had affected Gawain in later French romance, embracing “the traditional image of him as the loyal supportive vassal, the perfectly courteous knight, upholder of the reputation of the Round Table and reconciler, *par excellence*, of hostile elements in society with the law and order embodied in the Arthurian court.”<sup>213</sup> It is interesting to note how the rise of Arthurian romances in English happens mainly through romances featuring Gawain as protagonist, as if he had been chosen as *the* exemplary English knight, a phenomenon that has puzzled also critics: “One possible explanation for this is that British authors and audiences regarded Gawain as a British hero and that it was considered unseemly to show such a figure in a poor light.”<sup>214</sup> Gawain is also the dominant figure in all those romances that are not entirely devoted to him, but where he is an important secondary character, usually playing the

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<sup>210</sup> The dating of the poems are taken from: W.J.R. Barron, ed., *The Arthur of the English, the Arthurian Legend in Medieval English Life and Literature*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001.

<sup>211</sup> Windeatt, Barry, “The Fifteenth-century Arthur”, in Elizabeth Archibald and Ad Putter, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 86.

<sup>212</sup> Mills, Williams, Alexander, Allen and Barron, “Chivalric Romance”, p. 114.

<sup>213</sup> Rogers Gillian, Diane Speed, David Griffith and John Withrington, “Folk Romance”, in W.J.R. Barron, ed., *The Arthur of the English, the Arthurian Legend in Medieval English Life and Literature*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001, p. 198.

<sup>214</sup> Busby, “Gawain”, 1991, p. 178.

role of the main hero's helper, as in *Ywain and Gawain*, *Libeaus Desconus* and *Sir Percyvell of Galles*,<sup>215</sup> the first two of which are directly derived from French sources; this is why in *Libeaus Desconus* we find a rather less pleasant portrayal of Gawain than in the other romances.<sup>216</sup> Another text deriving directly from French Arthurian literature where Gawain (who is not the main protagonist) is portrayed in a very negative way is the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*,<sup>217</sup> an English verse romance probably written in the fourteenth century.<sup>218</sup>

Strangely enough however this rich local tradition of the perfect Gawain was almost totally disregarded by one of the major authors of Arthurian literature of medieval England, that is, Sir Thomas Malory, who did not follow the main trend of a flawless picture of Gawain but preferred to shape his own Gawain starting from the negative depiction he had received in the French prose romances of the thirteenth century, as we shall see in the next section.

### **1.5 Hero to Zero: the Controversial Gawain of Sir Thomas Malory**

Malory's prose *Le Morte Darthur* is the last work to be included in this survey of Gawain's appearances in medieval literature, being located toward the end of the period that is of interest here, since it was written between 1469 and 1470.<sup>219</sup> In Malory, the tradition of the largely positive characterization of Gawain that we have noticed so far in English medieval literature breaks abruptly. This is not a detail of secondary importance in the development of Arthurian romance on the whole, since *Le Morte Darthur* is probably "the most influential of all Arthurian texts",<sup>220</sup> and thus the way in which Gawain is depicted within this work is of

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<sup>215</sup> Mills, Williams, Alexander, Allen and Barron, "Chivalric Romance", p. 115.

<sup>216</sup> Dalrymple, p. 267.

<sup>217</sup> Dalrymple, "Sir Gawain in Middle English Romance", p. 267.

<sup>218</sup> Mahoney, Dhira B., "Stanzaic *Le Morte Arthur*", in Norris J. Lacy, ed., *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia*, New York: Garland, 1991, p. 430.

<sup>219</sup> Field, P.J.C., "Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*", in W.J.R. Barron, ed., *The Arthur of the English, the Arthurian Legend in Medieval English Life and Literature*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001, p. 225.

<sup>220</sup> Field, "Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*", p. 225.

crucial importance for the literary biography of our hero, since it influenced many postmedieval authors such as Tennyson.<sup>221</sup>

*Le Morte Darthur* needs some background information before going in depth into the analysis of Gawain's role in it. We do not know much about its author, apart from his name – Sir Thomas Malory – and what he tells of himself inside the work, that is, when he composed his work (the ninth year of King Edward IV's reign), his being a knight and a prisoner, and little more.<sup>222</sup> About fifteen years after Malory completed his book, the first English printer, William Caxton, took possession of a copy of the manuscript and arbitrarily divided the text into twenty-one books, each one divided in turn into various chapters, and added the incorrect French title with which it is now generally known.<sup>223</sup> The title is misleading, because the book on the whole does not tell only about the death of King Arthur, but gives account of Arthur's story, from birth to death, together with that of the knights of the Round Table, as Thomas Malory himself wrote in the closing words of his work, where he calls what he wrote “the hoole book of Kyng Arthur and of his noble knyghtes of the Round Table.”<sup>224</sup> Caxton's division into chapters was later questioned by Eugène Vinaver, whose 1947 edition of Malory's work proposes a different division of the narrative into eight “tales”, on the basis of the “explicit” that are interspersed in the text and that were originally in his opinion the real end of separate romances, only later unified by Caxton.<sup>225</sup> We are not sure whether the tales were intended to be part of the same work or separate tales that were subsequently unified by Caxton, also because we do not have a copy of the author's own manuscript,<sup>226</sup> however the different sections that form Malory's book have on the whole completeness and coherence,

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<sup>221</sup> Busby, “Gawain”, p. 178.

<sup>222</sup> Field, “Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*”, p. 225.

<sup>223</sup> Loomis, Roger Sherman, *The Development of Arthurian Romance*, London: Hutchinson, 1963, p. 166.

<sup>224</sup> Field, “Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*”, p. 225.

<sup>225</sup> Field, “Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*”, pp. 228-9.

<sup>226</sup> Field, “Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*”, p. 227.

and are arranged in chronological order as if they were supposed to fit into a unique narrative.<sup>227</sup>

The *Morte Darthur*, then, is not a life of Arthur, although the narrative is defined by his birth and death. Rather, it is precisely what Malory called it: the story of Arthur *and* his noble Knights of the Round Table. That is the story that Malory tried to unify, and he largely succeeded.<sup>228</sup>

Malory is also believed to have written *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, a verse romance in English, however he is surely much more known for the *Morte Darthur*.<sup>229</sup>

It is important to note also that Malory used a variety of sources to write the various sections of his account of Arthur's story, among which we find various French and English Arthurian narratives. At his time, a strong need for coherent reworkings of the various tales surrounding Arthur and the knights of the Round Table was felt, and Malory's intent seems to have been just that of creating a coherent story from the variety of sources he had at his disposal, and not by chance he often proclaims his use of "authorized" books.<sup>230</sup> Among the sources that Malory used we find the French Prose *Merlin*, the English Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, the French Prose *Lancelot* of the Vulgate Cycle, a lost English poem about Gareth, the French Prose *Tristan*, the French *Queste del Saint Graal*, the French *Mort Artu* and the English Stanzaic *Le Morte Arthur*.<sup>231</sup> The use of different sources is important to us because they not only helped him in building up the plot of his story, but also the characterization of its protagonists, where he was able to reconcile all these disparate sources and add something of his own.<sup>232</sup>

The heterogeneous genesis of Malory's work – and as a consequence, of his characters - is obviously reflected also in the way Gawain is depicted in the *Morte Darthur*. Indeed, the character of Gawain in Malory's work has been the object of debate for scholars who, "from

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<sup>227</sup> Field, "Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*", p. 231.

<sup>228</sup> Field, "Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*", p. 241.

<sup>229</sup> Field, "Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*", p. 227.

<sup>230</sup> Field, "Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*", p. 322.

<sup>231</sup> Field, Peter J.C., "Sir Thomas Malory", in Norris J. Lacy, ed., *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia*, New York: Garland, 1991, pp. 295-6.

<sup>232</sup> Field, "Sir Thomas Malory", p. 296.

Jessie L. Weston to T.H. White, [...] have puzzled over Malory's treatment of this colorful figure".<sup>233</sup> Scholars such as Roger Sherman Loomis argued that Malory's treatment of Gawain is the result of his use of such a great number of sources, and for Loomis in particular the figure of Gawain suffered from Malory's use of sources, being inconsistent and contradictory throughout the book: "The variety of his sources contributed both to the defects and the virtues of his compilation. [...] Far more serious flaws, arising from the diversity of sources, are the conflicting concepts of three major characters - Kay, Gawain, and Arthur himself."<sup>234</sup> For Loomis then the characterization of Gawain was a negative consequence of Malory's syncretism: "In book IV Gawain is depicted as a treacherous bounder; in book VII he is described as 'vengeable' and murderous; but in the last book Arthur mourns as 'the man in the world that I loved most', and sees him in a vision surrounded by ladies whom God had permitted to appear with him because he had done battle for their rights."<sup>235</sup> The right interpretation of Gawain's character in Malory then is of crucial importance also to shed light on the matter of unity and coherence in the *Morte Darthur* which I have already discussed above: "The scholarly attention focused upon this characterization indicates agreement that the role of Gawain is central to an interpretation of the *Morte D'Arthur* as a unified work."<sup>236</sup>

The idea at the basis of this interpretation of Malory's Gawain is that there are two contrasting traditions that Malory mixed together - without necessarily trying to reconcile them – concerning the figure of Sir Gawain, one positive and one negative, as expressed also by Eugène Vinaver:

While in the *Merlin*, the *Lancelot* and the *Mort Artu* Gawain is a noble, generous and valiant knight – indeed, a real embodiment of courtesy and bravery – in the French Prose *Tristan* he appears as a vindictive criminal, guilty of several offences and noted for his cruelty. Malory does not attempt to

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<sup>233</sup> Bartholomew, Barbara Gray, "The Thematic Function of Malory's Gawain", *College English*, 24 (1963), p. 262.

<sup>234</sup> Loomis, *The Development of Arthurian Romance*, p.171.

<sup>235</sup> Loomis, *The Development of Arthurian Romance*, p. 171.

<sup>236</sup> Bartholomew, p.262.

reconcile these two conceptions of Gawain's character: he blindly accepts the verdict of each of his sources and so produces a picture full of inconsistencies and contradictions.<sup>237</sup>

If we look more closely at Malory's text, the general impression that the theory of the inconsistency affecting the picture of Gawain supported by these critics is true, even if the occasions on which Gawain acts in a negative rather than positive way seems to be more frequent.<sup>238</sup> One of the first appearances of Gawain is indeed not a celebratory one, since one of the very first occurrences of his name, located in the second Book (following Caxton's division), is linked to the episode of his father's killing by king Pellinore, which Malory comments with these words: "But kynge Pellynore bare the wyte of the dethe of kynge Lott, wherefore Sir Gawayne revenged the deth of hys fadir the tenthe yere aftir he was made knyght, and slew king Pellynor hys owne hondis."<sup>239</sup> Gawain's fate seems thus to be linked with some kind of vengeance occurring because of a family member's death from his very first appearance in the book. The concept is repeated a few pages later: "And on the morne they founde letters of golde wretyn how that 'sir Gawayne shall revenge his fadirs dethe, king Lot, on kynge Pellynore."<sup>240</sup> There seems to be some insistence then on the part of Malory when writing about Gawain's need for revenge, that appears as something inevitable against which he is powerless, almost a doom cast upon him by an inscrutable fate. This impression is reinforced by the dark prediction with which the second Book ends, pronounced by Merlin who predicts the future while handling the sword of the dead Balin le Savage: "there shall never man handyll thys swerde but the best knyght of the worlde, and that shall be Sir Launcelot, [...] And Launcelot with thys swerde shall sle the man in the worlde that he lovith beste: that shall be sir Gawayne."<sup>241</sup> The first occurrences of Gawain in the *Morte Darthur* then seems to be all surrounded by a sense of decadence and ominous prediction, and we do

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<sup>237</sup> Vinaver, Eugene, ed., *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947, p. 1423, quoted in Barnett, D.J., "Whatever Happened to Gawain?", *English Studies in Africa*, 18 (1975), p. 1.

<sup>238</sup> Barnett, "Whatever Happened to Gawain?", *English Studies in Africa*, 18 (1975), p. 1.

<sup>239</sup> Malory, Thomas, *Le Morte Darthur*, edited by Eugène Vinaver, revised by P.J.C. Field, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990, p. 77.

<sup>240</sup> Malory, Thomas, *Le Morte Darthur*, p. 81.

<sup>241</sup> Malory, Thomas, *Le Morte Darthur*, p. 91.

not find positive comments surrounding Gawain's figure as in other texts we have met so far, for example in Chrétien de Troyes, where Gawain's name was almost always accompanied by some kind of praising epithet or as in Wace, where it was constantly qualified by the flattering title of "sire". Moreover, we do not find digressions upon his bravery, courtesy and other positive qualities but, as said, only hints to deeds of vengeance and murder that will happen in the future.

If we go more in depth into the analysis of Gawain's actions, this impression of a more negative than positive depiction of this character increases, as it can be seen in no less than "Gawain's first recorded adventure"<sup>242</sup> in the *Morte Darthur*, where he accidentally kills a lady. In the third Book, Gawain and his brother Gaheris are chasing a white hart, they enter a castle to catch it and then they kill it right in the "chyef place" of the castle.<sup>243</sup> A knight comes out from one of the chambers of the castle and slays two of Gawain's greyhounds "evyn in the syght of Sir Gawayne, and the remanente he chaced with hys swerde oute of the castell".<sup>244</sup> Then he threatens Gawain to kill him if he does not leave the castle, which causes Gawain's angry reaction, and a violent fight starts. Gawain has the better of the knight, who falls on the ground and begs for his mercy: "and than he cryed mercy and yielded hym and besought hym as he was a jantyll knyght to save hys lyff".<sup>245</sup> Barnett notes in reference to this fact that "Anyone with a knowledge of French medieval literature is reminded of Gornemant's advice to Perceval never to slay a knight who has yielded himself and begged for mercy".<sup>246</sup> Following the rules of knightly behaviour then, Gawain is expected to spare his opponent, however he openly breaks this rule, blinded by anger, and without listening to the knight's pleas prepares to behead him with the sword. His lack of mercy is highlighted by Malory: "Sir Gawayne wolde no mercy have, but unlaced hys helme to have strekyn of hys

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<sup>242</sup> Barnett, p. 2.

<sup>243</sup> Malory, Thomas, *Le Morte Darthur*, p. 105.

<sup>244</sup> Malory, Thomas, *Le Morte Darthur*, p. 105.

<sup>245</sup> Malory, Thomas, *Le Morte Darthur*, p. 106.

<sup>246</sup> Barnett, p. 2.



hede”.<sup>247</sup> At this point, the knight’s lady comes out from another chamber and falls over her lover, and Gawain cuts her head “by missefortune”.<sup>248</sup> Gaheris’ comment at this view underlines the shame that will stain from now his brother Gawain: “ ‘Alas,’ seyde Gaherys, ‘that ys fowle and shamefully done, for that shame shall never frome you. Also ye sholde gyff mercy unto them that ask mercy, for a knyght withoute mercy ys withoute worship.’”<sup>249</sup> It is true that Gawain is “astoned”<sup>250</sup> at the death of the lady and finally spares the knight’s life; however, this episode clearly throws a dark light upon Gawain. Malory makes it clear that the episode is a shameful one for Gawain, and not simply an accident, because at night four knights come to take vengeance on him for his misdeeds and say: “Thou new made knyght, thou haste shamed thy knyghthode, for a knyght withoute mercy is dishonoured. Also thou haste slayne a fayre lady to thy grete shame unto the worldys ende”.<sup>251</sup> Gawain’s accidental killing of the innocent lady causes also great disconcert at King Arthur’s court, since “the kyng and the quene were gretely displeased with Sir Gawayne for the sleynge of the lady.”<sup>252</sup> Gawain’s career as a knight is thus stained from its very beginning, and echoes of this dark episode will follow him also in other episodes; it is also interesting to note how the theme of decapitations seems to follow Gawain.

The negative echoes that surround Gawain’s first adventures as a knight seem to be slightly reduced in Book Four, where he is defined by king Pellinore as “good a knyght of his tyme as is ony in this londe”.<sup>253</sup> However, this definition sounds sadly ironical, if we think that just some pages before in the Second Book, Gawain had plotted with his brother Gaheris to kill king Pellinore, but apparently not so much to take vengeance on him for his father’s

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<sup>247</sup> Malory, Thomas, *Le Morte Darthur*, p. 106.

<sup>248</sup> Malory, Thomas, *Le Morte Darthur*, p. 106.

<sup>249</sup> Malory, Thomas, *Le Morte Darthur*, p. 106.

<sup>250</sup> Malory, Thomas, *Le Morte Darthur*, p. 106.

<sup>251</sup> Malory, Thomas, *Le Morte Darthur*, p. 107.

<sup>252</sup> Malory, Thomas, *Le Morte Darthur*, p. 108.

<sup>253</sup> Malory, Thomas, *Le Morte Darthur*, p. 131.

slain – even though it had happened fairly in battle – but because Pellinore has a more honourable place at the Round Table, a title that causes “grete envy” in Gawain’s heart.<sup>254</sup>

And therewith Merlyon toke kynge Pellinor by the honde, and in that one hande nexte the two segis, and the Sege Perelous, he seyde in opyn audiens, ‘Thys [is] your place, for beste are ye are worthy to sitte thereinne of ony that here ys.’

And thereat had sir Gawayne grete envy and tolde Gaherys hys brothir, ‘Yondir knyght ys putte to grete worship, whych grevith me sore, for he slewe oure fadir kynge Lott. Therefore I woll sle hym,’ seyde Gawayne, ‘with a swerde that was sette me that ys passynge trencheaunte.’<sup>255</sup>

In this passage, Gawain’s desire for vengeance seems to be more the effect of his envy for Pellinore’s position than of his desire of vengeance, thus his integrity as a knight comes out quite bruised, and his behaviour seems to be regardless of the rules of the chivalric code.

Another episode where Gawain openly breaks the rules of chivalry and acts in a very unpleasant way is in the fourth Book, where he dupes a lady by making her believe that her lover is dead and then sleeps with her, acting exactly as “the faithless womanizer and shallow reprobate of French romance.”<sup>256</sup> Ironically enough, Gawain had gone on a quest for the lady on the part of king Pelleas, who is a prisoner and suffers because he cannot see her beloved, who is also very harsh toward him. Gawain, apparently moved by a sincere desire to help this noble but unlucky knight, promises him “to do all that lyeth in my powere to gete you the love of your lady”.<sup>257</sup> However, it is partly true that the lady confesses to Gawain that she never could stand king Pelleas’ love, but Gawain’s behaviour is all the same not fair and even strange, since he initially seems really willing to help the suffering knight, but then changes his mind when he sees the lady and acts in a totally opposite – and not really chivalric – way. Later on, Sir Pelleas is made a knight of the Round Table, and Malory points out that he “loved never aftir Sir Gawayne, but as he spared hym for the love of the kynge”, and then adds that “Sir Pelleas was a worshypfull knyght, and was one of the foure that encheved the

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<sup>254</sup> Barnett, p. 1.

<sup>255</sup> Malory, Thomas, *Le Morte Darthur*, p. 102.

<sup>256</sup> Windeatt, p. 86.

<sup>257</sup> Malory, Thomas, *Le Morte Darthur*, p. 168.

Sankgreal.”<sup>258</sup> Malory seems to be contrasting the two knights in this passage, making Gawain appear almost unworthy of the title of Knight compared to Sir Pelleas.

The section of the *Morte Darthur* where Gawain’s evil conduct reaches its zenith is in the *Tristram* section (corresponding to Caxton’s Books Eight to Twelve), where together with his brother Gaheris and the arch-enemies Agravaine and Mordred he plots the death by ambush of Pellinore’s son, Sir Lamorak, who is guilty of courting Gawain’s mother.<sup>259</sup> This depiction of Gawain as a treacherous villain however was taken directly by Malory from his source for this section of his work, that is, the French Prose *Tristan*, a very popular work dated around 1240.<sup>260</sup> The influence of the French tradition of an evil Gawain upon Malory is thus clear in this part, and also in the last section of the *Morte Darthur*, “The Tale of Lancelot and Guinevere” and “The Mort Arthur Sanz Guerdon” (corresponding to Caxton’s Books Eighteen to Twenty-one) that has as one of its main sources the Stanzaic *Le Morte Arthur*, an English text derived from a French original that portrays Gawain in a very negative way, making of him the implacable enemy of his former friend Lancelot.<sup>261</sup> Here Gawain becomes one of the main causes of the final downfall of Arthur’s kingdom:<sup>262</sup> it is in the context of internal fights between different factions that are born inside Arthur’s court in the previous tales that Lancelot kills by accident Gareth, Gawain’s brother, thus provoking Gawain’s wrath and subsequent vengeance.<sup>263</sup> But this is exactly what will lead to the end of Arthur’s kingdom: Gawain’s anger and desire for vengeance is so strong that he makes Arthur pursue Lancelot on the continent, thus leaving Mordred free to usurp his father’s throne; at Arthur’s return it will be too late and almost all the knights of the Round Table, apart from Lancelot

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<sup>258</sup> Malory, Thomas, *Le Morte Darthur*, pp. 179-180.

<sup>259</sup> Barnett, p. 2.

<sup>260</sup> Barnett, p. 3.

<sup>261</sup> Mahoney, pp. 430-431.

<sup>262</sup> Field, “Sir Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*”, p. 240.

<sup>263</sup> Field, “Sir Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*”, p. 241.

and Bedivere, are killed in a battle on Salisbury Plain.<sup>264</sup> In this section, however, Gawain seems to be partially redeemed by Malory, who departs from his sources and makes him an almost tragic figure in his desperate need for vengeance at his brother's death.<sup>265</sup>

So far we have seen a picture of Gawain that is not really pleasant, however he does not act in such a negative way throughout the book, but shows also a more positive side on different occasions. For example, in the Fourth Book, he proves to be extremely loyal to Ywain, his sworn blood brother, when he is banished from King Arthur's court because he is suspected to have plotted for King Arthur's death. When he hears that Ywain is being banished from the court, Gawain decides to go on exile with him, saying that "whoso banyshyth my cosyn jarmayne shall banyshe me."<sup>266</sup> Moreover, his departure is received by the court with "great sorrow among all the estates", since, as Gawain's brother Gaheris comments, "we have loste two good knyghtes for the love of one."<sup>267</sup> He proves also to be a valiant knight on various occasions, as in Book Five, where he defeats King Priamus, a Saracen who then turns Christian and becomes Gawain's friend. This detail is not of secondary importance, because it is thanks to king Priamus that Arthur will be able to win the battle he has engaged against the Roman Emperor Lucius. Gawain acts also as a good brother when in Book Seven he finds out about his brother Gareth's identity – that had been concealed to him – and exclaims: "A, sir Gareth, I am your brother, Sir Gawayne, that for youre sake have had grete laboure and travaille",<sup>268</sup> showing sincere love for him.

In general, Gawain seems to be loyal toward his family members, and maybe his desire for vengeance can be partly explained by his fierce sense of blood ties. This can be seen also in the sincerely strong bond that seems to link Gawain with his uncle Arthur. As we have seen, he is loyal and useful in battle, as in the war against Lucius. Moreover, Arthur

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<sup>264</sup> Field, "Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*", p. 241.

<sup>265</sup> Barnett, p.4.

<sup>266</sup> Malory, Thomas, *Le Morte Darthur*, p. 158.

<sup>267</sup> Malory, Thomas, *Le Morte Darthur*, p. 158.

<sup>268</sup> Malory, Thomas, *Le Morte Darthur*, p. 357.

expresses clearly the genuine love he feels for his nephew, for example in the Thirteenth Book, where at Gawain's decision to leave the court to set off on the quest for the Holy Grail he comments sadly: "Alas! [...] ye have nygh slayne me for the avow that ye have made [...]" And therewith the teerys felle in hys yen, and than he seyde, 'Sir Gawayne, Gawayne! Ye have sette me in gret sorrow, for I have grete doute that my trew felyshyp shall never mete here more agayne.'"<sup>269</sup> Arthur shows his great love for Gawain also on the very moment of his nephew's death, where he manifests his great sorrow and even swoons thrice for the pain.<sup>270</sup> Finally, Gawain's ghost appears to Arthur and warns him not to fight on the next day because he would be surely killed: once again then he proves to be loyal to his family, even after his death.

So far we have tried to see if the hypothesis of an "inconsistent" and contradictory Gawain, deriving from Malory's use of diverse and sometimes conflicting versions of the Arthurian legend can be taken seriously. We could sum up this view of Gawain in Malory with Barbara Bartholomew's words:

In portraying Gawain, Malory uses each of the contradictory chronicle and romance traditions of the "bad Gawain" and the "good Gawain". The result is that in the *Morte Darthur* Gawain is good-humored, chivalrous, and loyal on some occasions, and spiteful, wicked, and treacherous on others. In short, Malory's Gawain emerges as a character composed of obvious inconsistencies of virtue and evil.<sup>271</sup>

Indeed from the examples above, the picture of Gawain that comes out from Malory's work is surely a controversial one, however as Bartholomew points out in her study, it could be that these inconsistencies are not simply a "side effect" of Malory's use of sources, but that this is exactly how Malory wanted Gawain's character to be. In the intentions of Malory then, Gawain had to embody in himself the "summa" of all the virtues and all the evils of the knights of the Round Table, thus becoming a kind of representative of all those knights, and ultimately bearing himself the tragic destiny of the Round Table: "Gawain functions as a

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<sup>269</sup> Malory, Thomas, *Le Morte Darthur*, pp. 866-867.

<sup>270</sup> Bartholomew, p. 267.

<sup>271</sup> Bartholomew, p. 262.

dramatic representative of all that happens to the Round Table fellowship [...] he reflects the qualities of good and bad which prove the Round Table's strength and its downfall."<sup>272</sup> With his often contradictory behaviour then, Gawain "typifies" the behaviour of all the knights of the Round Table, because he bears in himself all their good and bad qualities: "Since he creates Gawain as typifying the Round Table knights, perhaps Malory does not resolve the inconsistencies of the two traditions entangling the character of Gawain because he does not need to resolve them."<sup>273</sup> Those that have been traditionally seen as inconsistencies in Gawain's portrayal then are in reality the extremes that affect all men: "Gawain's inconsistency is the inconsistency of humanity",<sup>274</sup> and it is exactly this inconsistency exemplified by Gawain that takes the Round Table to its downfall.<sup>275</sup> Gawain's portrayal then is functional to Malory also to express his pessimistic vision of the "ideal", in this case Arthur's ideal represented by the "perfect" chivalry composing the Round Table, since he demonstrates that men are fallible, and this is why even the highest ideal is destined to fail.<sup>276</sup> In this sense, Gawain represents the "actual" against the ideal embodied by other knights such as Galahad and in part Lancelot.<sup>277</sup>

Malory's picture of Gawain is surely an intriguing one, endowed with a degree of complexity that leaves it open to various and contrasting interpretations. It is true that the sources that Malory used to shape his character play an important role in the matter of characterization in the *Morte Darthur*, and that the portrayal of Gawain that comes out of the book gives a strong impression of a contradictory character (with an insistence on his evil side), however it may be that Malory's use of sources was moved by a precise aim, that is, making Gawain the key to understand the causes of Arthur's downfall and an invitation for

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<sup>272</sup> Bartholomew, p. 263.

<sup>273</sup> Bartholomew, p. 265.

<sup>274</sup> Bartholomew, p. 265.

<sup>275</sup> Bartholomew, p. 266.

<sup>276</sup> Bartholomew, p. 267.

<sup>277</sup> Bartholomew, p. 266.

the reader to reflect upon the possibilities of the ideal. Once again then, Gawain proves to be a crucial figure in the Arthurian legend, even if the portrayal we have of him is not that of the flawless epic knight or of the perfect courtier.





## Chapter 2

### The Gawain Romances

#### 2.1 Can We Talk of “Gawain Romances”?

In the previous chapter we have been dealing with Gawain’s literary biography in the whole of the European medieval tradition; from now, our attention will be focused upon a group of poems that were produced in England between the second half of the fourteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth century, and that feature Sir Gawain as their main protagonist. These romances belong to the so-called “Matter-of-Britain”, that is, the whole of literary works (poetry and prose) dealing with Arthurian legends, “by far the most widespread and pervasive of romance categories.”<sup>1</sup> However, the figure of King Arthur himself does not seem to appeal much to romancers of medieval England, since only two Middle English poems are entirely devoted to him (the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* and a mid-fifteenth century poem known as the Marquis of Bath’s “Arthur”);<sup>2</sup> the majority of the Middle English romances deal with the adventures of the individual knights of the Round Table, and in particular with Sir Gawain, who “seems to have been the most popular of Arthur’s knights in medieval England.”<sup>3</sup> Other popular knights of The Round Table such as Perceval, Tristram and Lancelot were also protagonists of Middle English romances, but to a much lesser extent – only one poem survives for Perceval, *Syr Percyvelle of Galles*, one for Tristram, *Sir Tristrem*, and one for Lancelot, *Lancelot of the Laik*.<sup>4</sup> Gawain is thus the knight to whom the majority of the Matter-of-Britain romances are dedicated: “No other Arthurian knight is the hero of so

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<sup>1</sup>Sands, Donald B., ed., *Middle English Verse Romances*, Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1986, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Sands, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Sands, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Sands, p. 3.

large a group of English poems”<sup>5</sup> and, as we have seen, he surpasses even Arthur in number of appearances. Moreover, since the Matter of Britain is the most widespread category of romance in England, it is not incorrect to consider Gawain one of the most important characters of Middle English literature, and he seems to have been appealing to both literate and popular audiences, given the heterogeneous nature of the romances of which he is the main protagonist. The numerous references to Gawain that we find interspersed in medieval literature give us a confirmation of his widespread fame as a literary character, and of which the already cited quote from Chaucer’s *The Squire’s Tale* is the most exemplary one. Sir Frederic Madden, the editor of the first volume entirely dedicated to the Gawain romances, collected in his Introduction to the poems a series of references to Gawain that can be found in various medieval texts and that attest to his popularity. It is interesting to see how in these references he is almost taken as a representative for the entire genre of the Matter of Britain; for example, in the romance *Richard Coeur de Lion*, composed in the early fourteenth century, we find these lines:

Many romances men make newe,  
Of good knyghtes, strong and trewe;  
Off theyr dedes men rede romance,  
Bothe in Engeland and in France;  
Off Roweland and of Olyuer,  
And of euery doseper;  
Of Alisandre and Charlemain,  
Off kyng Arthour and of Gawayn;  
How they were knyghtes good and curteys,  
Off Turpyn and of Ogier Daneys.<sup>6</sup>

The allusions to Gawain continue also in the fifteenth and well into the sixteenth century, as attested also by another curious reference, “Laneham’s amusing account of the actors in the

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<sup>5</sup> Newstead, Elaine, “Arthurian Legends”, in J. Burke Severs, ed., *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050-1500*, New Haven: The Connecticut Academy Of Arts And Sciences, 1967, p. 54.

<sup>6</sup> Weber, Henry, ed., *Metrical Romances of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Century*, Edinburgh: George Ramsay and Company, 1840, p. 4, in Frederic Madden, ed., *Syr Gawayne: A Collection of Ancient Romance-Poems by Scottish and English Authors Relating to that Celebrated Knight of the Round Table*, London: Richard & John E. Taylor:1939, p. xxxviii.

Coventry pageant before Queen Elizabeth at Kenilworth”,<sup>7</sup> where Gawain’s name is used almost as a bye-word<sup>8</sup> for “firm, vigorous”, thus attesting how pervasive his reputation had become to make of him an almost proverbial figure, and not only in literate environments:

But aware ! keep bak, make room noow, heer they cum ! And fyrst captin Cox,—an od man, I promiz yoo,—by profession a mason, and that right skilfull; very cunning in fens, and hardy as Gawin, for hiz tonsword hangs at his tablz end.<sup>9</sup>

Madden notes also that the figure of Sir Gawain was the “prototype” for Spenser’s character Sir Calidore in the *Faerie Queene*, who is presented as a courteous knight, of widespread renown, able both in battle and conversation.<sup>10</sup>

From what said above, it is clear that Gawain was really an important character in Middle English literature, to the point of being taken as representative of the whole Arthurian literature and an almost proverbial figure. We have already mentioned in the previous chapter the questions that such investiture of Gawain as English romance hero *par excellence* raises, because the fact that he was chosen as protagonist for a number of heterogeneous poems over 150 years does not only attest to the popularity of this character, but becomes almost a riddle for scholars who try to understand the reason at the basis of such popularity. Why did the authors of these poems feel so attracted by the figure of Gawain? Were they simply relying upon the popularity given to Gawain by the proliferation of the burlesque poems dedicated to him by the French continuators of Chrétien de Troyes? But why then did they decide to diverge from the tradition of a “debauched” Gawain and make him an almost flawless hero? Indeed, the way Gawain is depicted in Middle English romances seems almost unaffected by the negative reputation that French poets post-Chrétien had attached to him: “English poets reject the idea of a degenerate Gawain; with them he remains the loyal lieutenant of dynastic

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<sup>7</sup> Madden, Frederic, *Syr Gawayne: A Collection of Ancient Romance-Poems by Scottish and English Authors Relating to that Celebrated Knight of the Round Table*, London, Richard & John E. Taylor:1939, p. xl.

<sup>8</sup> Madden, p. xl.

<sup>9</sup> *Letter on the entertainment of the Queen at Kenilworth*, p. 34, 1575, in Madden, Frederic, *Syr Gawayne: A Collection of Ancient Romance-Poems by Scottish and English Authors Relating to that Celebrated Knight of the Round Table*, London, Richard & John E. Taylor:1939, p. pp. xl-xli.

<sup>10</sup> Madden, p. xli.

romance, the embodiment of the basic knightly virtues in accounts of his own chivalric adventures.”<sup>11</sup> It could be then that these romances were originally intended to restore Gawain’s reputation in open contrast with the French tradition which had started the process of Gawain’s “epic degeneration”, in an attempt to bring him back to the status of ideal knight he had embodied before the thirteenth century. However, as noted by Beate Schmolke-Hasselmann, the idealization to which he had been subjected before that time had transformed Gawain in an almost “boring and colourless” figure, which caused the reaction of both the public and the authors against the “excessive and therefore rather tedious idealization of Gawain.”<sup>12</sup> The process of de-idealization to which the figure of Gawain was subjected in the ends of thirteenth-century French authors then could have been an attempt to make this character more lively and mark his personality.<sup>13</sup> The fact that the majority of English authors preferred again an idealized – but boring – Gawain against a more interesting depiction of him, for example comic and burlesque or vindictive and tragic, reinforces the impression that for some reason they were particularly attached to this figure, and thus preferred to hide the faults attached to him by the French authors even if they had made of him a more colorful and lively character.

The reason at the basis of Gawain’s prominent position in the Matter-of-Britain English romances is probably destined to remain in the field of conjecture, but we can agree with Keith Busby who argues that he was probably seen by audiences as a national hero, and so “it was considered unseemly to show such a figure in a poor light”.<sup>14</sup> The reason at the basis for such “patriotic” investiture that was attached to Gawain is not clear, but suggests that it could have been sustained by popular beliefs and legends, derived from more ancient times,

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<sup>11</sup> Barron, W.R.J., *English Medieval Romance*, New York: Longman, 1987, p. 159.

<sup>12</sup> Schmolke-Hasselmann, Beate, *The Evolution of Arthurian Romance, The Verse Tradition from Chrétien to Froissart*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 105.

<sup>13</sup> Schmolke-Hasselmann, p. 105.

<sup>14</sup> Busby, Keith, “Gawain”, in Norris J. Lacy, ed., *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia*, New York: Garland, 1991, p. 178.

that are now lost, and the remnants of which are to be found - transformed and almost unrecognizable – in the Gawain romances themselves. The hypothesis that at the basis of many of these romances there were popular beliefs is supported by Barron, who thinks that they were originally folk-tales motifs derived from Galloway, “the bridge to Gaelic Scotland known in the twelfth century as ‘the kingdom of Gawain’”.<sup>15</sup> The basis for Gawain’s success with Middle English romancers then could be his status as a popular hero in tales that have not come to us: “No member of the Round Table appealed more strongly to the English imagination than Sir Gawain, perhaps because he could be most readily identified with the archetypal folk-hero seeking self-knowledge through adventure”.<sup>16</sup> This hypothesis is supported also by other scholars, for example K.G.T. Webster says that: “one is led to conjecture that in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries this region [Galloway] was a focus of romance the embers of which are the well-known English-Scottish Gawain poems of two centuries later.”<sup>17</sup> An early scholar of the Gawain legend, Jessie Weston, was among the first to support the idea that the Gawain poems that have come to us may be the remnants of “a large body of tales of about Gawain which are now lost.”<sup>18</sup> In particular, Gawain enjoyed popularity in Scotland; after all, he is the son of Lot of Orkney, that is, the Orkney Islands, and thus could be easily felt as a local hero, and we have already mentioned in the previous chapter his associations with Galloway. Frederic Madden gives this detail as a matter of fact: “it is scarcely necessary to add, that in southern Scotland the popularity of his exploits could not have been less, since he there was claimed as one of their own chieftains, the *Lord of Galloway*.”<sup>19</sup> Gawain was even considered by the Scots as a more rightful heir of Britain’s throne than Arthur, as explained by Nicola Royan:

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<sup>15</sup> Barron, p. 159.

<sup>16</sup> Barron, p. 158.

<sup>17</sup> Webster, K.G.T., “Galloway and the Romances”, *Modern Language Notes*, 55 (1940), p. 363.

<sup>18</sup> Newstead, p. 54.

<sup>19</sup> Madden, p. xli.

Arthur was conceived in adultery and thus being illegitimate should not have acceded to the British throne. There were legitimate heirs to the throne, namely Mordred and Gawain, sons of Uther's legitimate daughter, Morgause, by her marriage to Lot of Lothian and Orkney. However, through a misguided desire to have a king of their own people, the Britons chose Arthur instead. This is the version of Arthur's origins current in much late medieval Scottish historiography, and although various mitigating factors are offered to support the Britons' choice, such as the youth of Lot's sons or Arthur's personal valour, Arthur's illegitimacy infects his behaviour.<sup>20</sup>

This version of the Arthurian legend attests to the favourable light in which Gawain was held in the eyes of the Scots. The popularity enjoyed by Gawain among the Scots is attested also by one of the poems included among the Gawain romances, *The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawain*, that "represents what may well have been a larger body of Scottish Gawain romances."<sup>21</sup> Another hypothesis that could be formulated to justify Gawain's success in medieval romances then is that it was in part a reflection of the popularity he enjoyed in Scotland; this could explain why English romancers seem to be uninterested in the faults that French authors had attached to Gawain.

So far we have been talking of the "Gawain romances" without taking into consideration the internal differences that exist among these poems, and that are sometimes quite relevant, like the big distance in time that separates *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* from the later romances of the fourteenth century; other differences are to be found for example in the language and the "genre" to which they can be ascribed. The main element that enables us to talk of "Gawain-romances" then seems to be exactly the presence of Gawain, that functions as an element of cohesion for a group of tales devoted to his figure. However is the presence of Gawain sufficient to single out this group of tales, or are there among the poems themselves differences so big – in terms of time of production, genre, geographical distribution and so on - that they can disrupt the unity of the whole? In other words, is it correct to talk of Gawain romances, or are the ties that link these tales too feeble

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<sup>20</sup> Royan, Nicola, "The Fine Art of Faint Praise in Older Scots Historiography", in Rhiannon Purdie and Nicola Royan, eds., *The Scots and Medieval Arthurian Legend*, Bury St Edmunds: St Edmundsbury Press, 2005, p. 43.

<sup>21</sup> Archibald, Elizabeth, "*Lancelot of the Laik*: Sources, Genre, Reception", in Rhiannon Purdie and Nicola Royan, eds., *The Scots and Medieval Arthurian Legend*, Bury St Edmunds: St Edmundsbury Press, 2005, *The Scots and Medieval Arthurian Legend*, p. 72.

to justify such a definition? Thomas Hahn, the editor of a volume collecting “eleven romances and tales” dedicated to Gawain – the only volume entirely dedicated to the “Gawain romances” together with that of Frederic Madden - assumes that “the force of the hero’s character is sufficient to overshadow the differences in texts produced over the course of several hundred years.”<sup>22</sup> In particular there seems to be a gap between the three earliest romances – *Libeaus Desconus*, *Ywain and Gawain* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* - that have not been included by Hahn, and the others, that have a more “popular” appeal.<sup>23</sup> The aim of this chapter will be that of proposing a set of criteria - based respectively on chronology, genre and recurrent themes - that will make it possible to understand the main differences among these poems, and at the same time determine the common traits that make of them a coherent group, and judge if the definition of “Gawain romances” is sufficiently supported by these common features or if we have to propose a different classification for these poems.

## **2.2 A Chronological and Geographical Overview of the Gawain Poems**

The first element that I will take into consideration in my analysis of the Gawain poems will be their chronological and geographical distribution; together with this I will provide a general presentation of the poems themselves and a summary of their plot. The aim of this section then will be that of trying to determine the main differences in terms of time and place of production between these poems, and whether these differences can be disregarded when talking about the Gawain poems as a group or whether these differences are so relevant that they can disrupt the unity of the whole and force us to abandon this definition.

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<sup>22</sup> Hahn, Thomas, ed., *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995, p. 24.

<sup>23</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 24.

On the basis of the chronological distribution of the Gawain poems – that on the whole date from the first half of the fourteenth century to the early years of the sixteenth century – three main groups can be outlined, separated by significant spans of time. The first group can be seen as forerunning the other romances, creating an antecedent for the future literary success of Gawain, and is composed by *Libeaus Desconus* and *Ywain and Gawain*, “both dating from the earlier fourteenth century”.<sup>24</sup> These poems are the earliest in terms of time of production, and are both characterized by the fact that Gawain is not the absolute protagonist of the story but plays a relatively minor role.<sup>25</sup> However, they seem to have established once for all Gawain’s prominence among the Arthurian characters: after Layamon’s *Brut*, that as we have seen was the first to introduce the Arthurian chronicles in England,<sup>26</sup> early Arthurian narratives from the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century such as *Arthur and Merlin* and *Sir Perceval of Galles* only “recount minor deeds of Gawain, but when he finally enters the literary scene in *Ywain and Gawain* and *Libeaus Desconus* (both before 1350), he establishes himself as the unblemished paragon of chivalric virtue.”<sup>27</sup> These poems are distinguished from the others also because they are probably the only ones for which we can find direct literary sources: *Ywain and Gawain* is in fact “the only surviving romance in Middle English that was quite certainly translated directly from an original by Chrétien de Troyes”,<sup>28</sup> that is, *Yvain*, while *Libeaus Desconus* (meaning “The Fair Unknown”) shares many episodes with Renaut de Beaujeu’s *Li biaus desconueus* (or *Le bel inconnu*, c.1190).<sup>29</sup> They can also be seen then as a hybrid literary product, where English authors are trying to elaborate upon the

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<sup>24</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 6.

<sup>26</sup> Hahn, Thomas, “Gawain and Popular Chivalric Romance in Britain”, in Roberta L. Krueger, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 221.

<sup>27</sup> Hahn, “Gawain and Popular Chivalric Romance in Britain”, p. 221.

<sup>28</sup> Mills, Maldwyn, Elizabeth Williams, Flora Alexander, Rosamund Allen and W.R.J. Barron, “Chivalric Romance”, in W.J.R. Barron, ed., *The Arthur of the English, the Arthurian Legend in Medieval English Life and Literature*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001, p. 117.

<sup>29</sup> Mills, Williams, Alexander, Allen and Barron, p. 125.



French Arthurian tradition but still rely upon established models to develop their own poetic outcome.

*Yvain and Gawain* – that survives only in one manuscript of the early fifteenth century, British Library Cotton Galba E. ix -<sup>30</sup> is written in a Northern dialect; the language is thought to be that of the original author because of North-East Midland forms that are reflected in the rhyme.<sup>31</sup> The audience to which the poem was directed was different from that of Chrétien, “more mercantile in its livelihood than Chrétien’s courtly group;”<sup>32</sup> this is why the poet did not simply limit himself to translate plainly the original French text, but shortened it by almost a third, often at the expenses of Chrétien’s subtle and detailed descriptions, focusing more on the action and transforming the story into a “fast-paced plot”,<sup>33</sup> thanks also to the use of short couplets; this is why the poem is considered “one of the most successful in Middle English”.<sup>34</sup>

*Libeaus Desconus* seems to have been really successful in England, since it is preserved in six fifteenth-century manuscripts<sup>35</sup> (a big difference with the single manuscript, for example, of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, or of the poem’s source, Renaut de Beaujeu’s *Le bel inconnu*). *Libeaus Desconus* is also the only one among the Gawain romances for which we can make a hypothesis about its probable author’s name, Thomas Chestre, who wrote other two poems contained in the same manuscript of *Libeaus Desconus*, *Sir Launfal* and *Octavian*, in a Southern dialect.<sup>36</sup> The story follows the pattern of the traditional “Fair Unknown” motif, where a young man – in this case Gingelein, Gawain’s son – goes through a series of tests until he finds out he is a boy of noble origins, the son of a king

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<sup>30</sup> Kooper, Erik S., *Yvain and Gawain*, in Norris J. Lacy, ed., *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia*, New York: Garland, 1991, p. 531.

<sup>31</sup> Braswell, Mary Flowers, ed., *Sir Perceval of Galles and Yvain and Gawain*, Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995, p. 77.

<sup>32</sup> Braswell, p. 77.

<sup>33</sup> Braswell, pp. 78-79.

<sup>34</sup> Newstead, p. 65.

<sup>35</sup> Newstead, p. 68.

<sup>36</sup> Newstead, p. 68.

or an illustrious knight, and has some kind of reward, namely the love of a noble lady. The story has analogues also in other languages, such as the Italian *Carduino* (c.1375) and the Middle High German *Wigalois* (c. 1210),<sup>37</sup> in addition to the French *Le bel inconnu*, and we find the same motif also in Malory's *Tale of Sir Gareth*, where the "Fair Unkown" is Gareth, younger brother of Gawain. Malory's *Tale* seems in turn to have been drawn from a lost poem about Gawain, "which in turn would be a reworking of a younger-brother story from the world of traditional storytelling."<sup>38</sup> The story was thus popular in origin, and widespread throughout Europe, and has as its ultimate source a famous Irish saga, "The Wasting Sickness of Cuchulainn",<sup>39</sup> that was then linked in particular to Sir Gawain – himself or his relatives – probably because the son or younger brother of such an exemplary knight could have been immediately recognized as of noble origins even among not literate audiences, or maybe because of his traditional connections with Cuchulainn himself. Moreover it would have been strange to make such figure the unknown or illegitimate son of Arthur, who already had one important figure with this role in the legend, that is, Mordred, who was destined to doom his reign; this is probably why the role of "unaware father/brother" was attached to Gawain, as the "next in line" in order of importance after King Arthur, the principal knight after the king himself. The story became thus particularly popular in England – as attested by the six surviving manuscripts and by other extant versions of the story, such as the one in Malory – which is probably due to the "intense interest" of British audiences in the figure of Sir Gawain,<sup>40</sup> whose son or younger brother could not fail to be famous like him.

Even if these two poems have declared sources behind them, they both operate considerable reworkings upon their originals, and result in the end not simple translations, but quite different and innovative poems. *Ywain and Gawain* shows from the title a shift in the

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<sup>37</sup> Newstead, p. 69.

<sup>38</sup> Field, P.J.C., "Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*", in W.J.R. Barron, ed., *The Arthur of the English, the Arthurian Legend in Medieval English Life and Literature*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001, p. 235.

<sup>39</sup> Loomis, Roger Sherman, *The Development of Arthurian Romance*, London: Hutchinson & Co., 1963, p. 135

<sup>40</sup> Newstead, p. 68.

focus of the story from Chrétien de Troyes's tale, where the focus was on Ywain's adventures, and concentrates more on the "climactic episode" where Gawain and Ywain fight against each other.<sup>41</sup> A more general shift happens also in the main concern of the poem, that is, "its emphasis upon 'trowth' (*loyalty, constancy*) rather than upon *amour courtois* as a principle of chivalric action."<sup>42</sup> *Libeaus Desconus* is also quite different from its supposed source, *Le bel inconnu*, because it introduces big changes in the order of events and in the names of the characters; these differences have brought critics to believe that there was a common Anglo-Norman source from which both these works derived.<sup>43</sup> In both cases then we have "transitional" texts that clearly borrow from French Arthurian narratives but in an original way, making changes in the original matter to make it more suitable for their audiences, that were different from those of Chrétien de Troyes. In both cases, the figure of Gawain – even if not entirely at the centre of the story – seems to act as a familiar object that can "naturalize" the French narrative to make it more "English" – and thus more appealing to an English audience.

The second sub-group that can be isolated in the whole of the Gawain romances is constituted by two poems, *The Awntyrs off Arthur* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, both dating around 1375.<sup>44</sup> Unlike the poems discussed above, we cannot find direct sources from which these texts were translated or largely drawn, but they are nonetheless the product of "high literate" authors,<sup>45</sup> even if we do not know exactly who these authors were. Both these poems are sophisticated narratives: *The Awntyrs off Arthur* combines a "popular story, academic learning and extravagant alliterative stylistics",<sup>46</sup> while *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is universally recognized as a masterpiece of Middle English literature, that does not

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<sup>41</sup> Mills, Williams, Alexander, Allen and Barron, p. 117.

<sup>42</sup> Mills, Williams, Alexander, Allen and Barron, p. 117.

<sup>43</sup> Newstead, p. 69.

<sup>44</sup> Hahn, "Gawain and Popular Chivalric Romance in Britain", p. 222.

<sup>45</sup> Hahn, "Gawain and Popular Chivalric Romance in Britain", p. 222.

<sup>46</sup> Hahn, "Gawain and Popular Chivalric Romance in Britain", p. 222.

only provide a splendid example of Arthurian romance but even “reprocesses popular culture to interrogate the ethos of knighthood and to transmute the genre of romance, rendering it a splendid anomaly among English Gawain stories.”<sup>47</sup>

*The Awntyrs off Arthur* (The Adventures of Arthur) was composed around the same years as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, again in alliterative verses, in the North of England, and probably in Cumberland; it seems to have been quite successful, even outside its original place of composition, since it is preserved in four fifteenth-century manuscripts all coming from different parts of England.<sup>48</sup> The plot is formed by two stories: the first one is based upon the *Trental of St. Gregory*,<sup>49</sup> a popular motif associated with Pope Gregory the Great, and tells about the ghost of Guinevere’s mother that appears at the Tarn Wadling (a lake) and advises her about the necessity to lead a pious life and reject sin, that has caused her damnation after death. The second story sees once again Gawain involved in a challenge with a knight called Galeron of Galloway, who appears at court claiming that Arthur’s possessions in Galloway are not legitimate and asking for a duel; needless to say, Gawain accepts the challenge and wins. In the end Galeron reconciles with King Arthur and is made knight of the Round Table by Arthur. The author of the poem was “almost certainly” a cleric,<sup>50</sup> a detail that can be confirmed by the first section of the story, where a penitential theme connected to Guinevere is developed. This fact, added to the poetic skills of his author – “*Awntyrs* is composed in one of the most demanding and richly echoic verse forms in the English language”<sup>51</sup> suggests that the poem is a high literary product, even if not as splendid as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Moreover, the poet was probably moved by a “popular interest in chivalric ideals”,<sup>52</sup> and it is exactly this “fusion of popular and learned” that makes of

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<sup>47</sup> Hahn, “Gawain and Popular Chivalric Romance in Britain”, p. 222.

<sup>48</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 169.

<sup>49</sup> Newstead, p. 61.

<sup>50</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 171.

<sup>51</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 172.

<sup>52</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 173.

*Awntyrs* a transitional poem, where oral performances and literate production were mixed together in chivalric romance.<sup>53</sup>

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is universally recognized as a masterpiece of Middle English literature, and its merits can be summarized in these words by John Matthews: “a remarkable work of genius which tells an astonishing story with pace, colour and unforgettable imagery”.<sup>54</sup> Despite its literary merits however, the poem survives in only one manuscript, the British Library Cotton Nero A.x, together with three other poems – *Pearl*, *Cleanness* and *Patience* – which are generally believed to be all from the same unknown author.<sup>55</sup> The poem is written in a Northwest Midland dialect, and consists of 2530 lines linked by alliteration and arranged in stanzas of a variable number of unrimed lines followed by groups of five short rimed lines called “bob and wheel”.<sup>56</sup> The four large initials that can be found in the manuscript are generally taken as an internal division of the poem into four sections known as “fitts”.<sup>57</sup> At the end of the poem there is a reference to the “Order of the Garter” that was founded in 1348, which helps to date the poem.<sup>58</sup> The story tells about Gawain’s accomplishment of a challenge set by a mysterious Green Knight, who appears at King Arthur’s court and asks for a blow with the axe, but will give the same blow back to the knight a year later. The Challenge or Beheading Game is one of the central themes of the plot, to be found also in other stories featuring Gawain, and it ultimately derives from a Celtic source, the Irish saga *Bricriu’s Feast*, where the hero being tested is Cuchulainn.<sup>59</sup> This Irish tale was absorbed by French Arthurian narrative, but *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is the text that preserves the major number of details from the original Irish story.<sup>60</sup> The motif of the

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<sup>53</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 173.

<sup>54</sup> Matthews, John, *Sir Gawain, Knight of the Goddess*, Rochester: Inner Traditions, 2003, p. 64.

<sup>55</sup> Newstead, “Arthurian Legends”, p. 54.

<sup>56</sup> Newstead, “Arthurian Legends”, p. 54.

<sup>57</sup> Andrew, Malcolm and Ronald Waldron, eds., *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2010, p. 22.

<sup>58</sup> Malcolm and Waldron, p. 22.

<sup>59</sup> Newstead, p. 55.

<sup>60</sup> Newstead, p. 55.

Beheading Game is then combined with that of the Temptation<sup>61</sup> set out by the lady of the castle where Gawain finds refuge during his search for the Green Chapel, the place where the Green Knight has given him the appointment for the return blow. Gawain's endurance at the lady's sexual offers (occurring in three episodes that are evidently paralleled with the hunting to which Sir Bertilak of Hautdesert, the lord of the castle, dedicates himself while Gawain and Lady Bertilak stay at home) determines his success in the challenge: he is spared by the Green Knight who was the lord of the castle and the lady's husband, and only slightly wounds Gawain's neck because he has accepted from the lady a green girdle which - she had said - was magic and could save him from harm. He also reveals that the entire "game" had been organized by Morgain le Fay to frighten Guinevere. In the end however, Gawain's behaviour is not immaculate, since he is blamed by Sir Bertilak for his "moral faultiness", but the nature of Gawain's "sin" is not clear and has caused scholarly debate.<sup>62</sup> His fault may derive from fear of death, represented by his acceptance of the green girdle, or by the fact that refusing the lady's advances he has betrayed his reputation as a perfectly courteous knight; accepting her sexual invitations however would have caused another breach of the rules of courtesy, this time toward the Lord of the castle. In general then the rules of chivalry result quite contradictory, and Gawain himself seem to have not a clear conduct in the poem: he flinches two times at the moment of receiving the return blow from the Green Knight, but before he had not been afraid to accept his challenge. Finally, the poet seems to overtly play upon the seriousness of Gawain's fault,<sup>63</sup> when he finally comes back to King Arthur's court, ashamed for his moral defeat, but when he tells to the courtiers his story everybody starts laughing and they even decide to wear a green girdle in honour of Gawain.

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<sup>61</sup> Newstead, p. 55.

<sup>62</sup> Scattergood, Vincent J., "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight", in Norris J. Lacy, ed., *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia*, New York: Garland, p. 421.

<sup>63</sup> Scattergood, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight", p. 421.

The interpretation of the story is not at all simple then, and the picture of Gawain that we have at the end is at least puzzling, because we are not sure whether we can take his reputation seriously or not, and poses in general doubts on the rules of chivalry and courteous behaviour. The poem could thus be seen as “transitory”, like *Awntyrs*, and both poems seem to have a critical attitude toward the world of chivalry: *Awntyrs* starts with a penitential theme, not exactly what we would expect from a chivalric poem, and with a prophecy of King Arthur’s downfall,<sup>64</sup> while *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* gives us a problematic representation of chivalric behaviour exemplified by Gawain’s sense of shame.

The third and last group of tales that can be identified is constituted by those tales that were composed during the fifteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth. Even if the extant versions of these poems are all later than the poems described above, they were probably earlier in composition: “they almost certainly circulated from the thirteenth century on, but extant manuscripts date from the fifteenth to the mid-seventeenth centuries.”<sup>65</sup> According to Hahn, it was exactly this latter “cluster of popular English Gawain romances”<sup>66</sup> that formed the basis for Gawain’s renown among audiences and that made him the ideal hero to be featured in more literate works such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. These poems seem to have had a more popular appeal than those mentioned before, and were intended for oral recitation; this can be seen also by the state of the manuscripts in which they have been found: most of them show in fact signs of “modest origins and constant use.”<sup>67</sup> Moreover, these texts have only rarely recognizable sources, and are often drawn from “traditional tales and oral stories, either with no known sources or with only a distant relation to a literary text.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 171.

<sup>65</sup> Hahn, “Gawain and Popular Chivalric Romance in Britain”, p. 222.

<sup>66</sup> Hahn, “Gawain and Popular Chivalric Romance in Britain”, p. 222.

<sup>67</sup> Hahn, “Gawain and Popular Chivalric Romance in Britain”, p. 222.

<sup>68</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 6.

An important source for us in the study of this last group of poems is represented by the Percy Folio, a manuscript named after Thomas Percy of Dromore (in Ireland), the bishop who found the volume and used some of the texts included in it to compile his *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1729).<sup>69</sup> The manuscript was realized around 1650 by a single scribe<sup>70</sup> and was found by Percy lying on the floor of one of his friends' house, "being used by the maids to light the fire":<sup>71</sup> this is why many pages are torn in half, and as a consequence, texts such as *King Arthur and King Cornwall* have been almost halved and must be reconstructed using other extant versions of the same story. Further damages were made by the binder who bound the manuscript for Percy, because he "pared off some of the top and bottom lines in different parts of the volume."<sup>72</sup> The scribe came probably from Lancashire or Cheshire; Percy suggested that the author was Thomas Blount, author of works such as the *Law Dictionary* (1670), but there is no evidence for this.<sup>73</sup> Some of the Gawain romances here considered are contained in the Percy Folio, sometimes in single copy, that is, *The Marriage of Sir Gawain*, *The Carle of Carlisle*, *The Turke and Sir Gawain* and *King Arthur and King Cornwall*. The Percy Folio represents thus a precious source to understand the importance of Gawain in Middle English literature, because even if the manuscript is dated 1650, it contains much earlier texts, that were still in vogue at the time by which they were collected by the anonymous scribe: "The Percy Folio scribe clearly wished to preserve a large group of what were by the mid-seventeenth century ancient romances and entertainments, many of which must have been transmitted orally."<sup>74</sup> This text was also the one from which Sir Frederick Madden took some of the poems printed in his volume dedicated to Sir Gawain in 1839, and in particular *The Carle of Carlisle*, *The Greene Knight* and *The Turke and Sir Gawain*. Hahn

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<sup>69</sup> Whitaker, Muriel A., "Thomas Percy", in Norris J. Lacy, ed., *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia*, New York: Garland, 1991, p. 357.

<sup>70</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 311.

<sup>71</sup> Hales, John W., and Frederick J. Furnivall, eds., *Bishop Percy's Folio Manuscript, Ballads and Romances*, London: Spottiswoode, 1868, vol.2, p. xii.

<sup>72</sup> Hales and Furnivall, p. xii.

<sup>73</sup> Hales and Furnivall, pp. xiii - xiv.

<sup>74</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 310.



points out how the texts contained in the Percy Folio are generally “more popular” in tone than other extant versions of the same story,<sup>75</sup> for example texts such as *The Marriage of Sir Gawain* or *The Carle of Carlisle* represent the popular version of other texts, respectively *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* and *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*. The popular nature of these texts is largely due to the fact that they were often intended for oral recitation and directed toward mixed audiences.<sup>76</sup> We will see in more detail the characteristics of each text in the following paragraphs.

*Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle* and *The Carle of Carlisle* are two different poems basically telling the same story: the first poem was composed probably in Shropshire about 1400, and is preserved in the National Library of Wales Porkington MS 10, while the second poem is one of the Percy Folio and is a ballad composed in Lancashire between 1500 and 1550.<sup>77</sup> Both poems seem to derive from the same earlier version of the story, now lost,<sup>78</sup> but the ballad preserves an episode that is not in the originating poem but that must have been an important element of the story, that is, the beheading of the Carle.<sup>79</sup> The protagonists of the story are Arthur, Gawain, Kay and Baldwin. They are hunting in a forest, and Gawain, Kay and Baldwin find shelter in the house of the “Carle” (a word derived from Old Norse meaning “churl”, that we find for example also in Chaucer’s definition of the Miller, a “stout carl”),<sup>80</sup> who is a giant. During their stay at the castle, the Carle subjects Gawain to various tests, bidding him to throw a spear at him, kiss his wife and sleep with his daughter. Gawain always submits to the Carle’s will, though he is only a churl. In the final test, the Carle asks Gawain to behead him (this episode however is to be found only in the ballad version of the story), and then he transforms into a “normal” knight. He reveals that he had slain a lot of knights in

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<sup>75</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 310.

<sup>76</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 310.

<sup>77</sup> Newstead, pp. 59-60.

<sup>78</sup> Newstead, p. 59.

<sup>79</sup> Newstead, p. 61.

<sup>80</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 81.

the previous years, because they had refused to obey him, and that Gawain is the only one who has succeeded so far thanks to his courtesy; he promises to change his behaviour from now on and become an exemplary knight like Gawain, and King Arthur makes him a knight of the Round Table. It is not improbable that a burlesque element was inherent in the paradoxical confrontation between the courteous Gawain and the Carle, basically a “hideous rough churl”, who addresses Gawain even “with a certain kindly contempt”,<sup>81</sup> thus probably making the story particularly appealing for a popular audience, as attested by the ballad version of the story.

*The Avowyng of Arthur* was probably composed in the North of England around 1425 by a West Midland scribe; it is preserved only in one manuscript (Ireland Blackburn, now in the Robert H. Taylor Collection at Princeton University).<sup>82</sup> The word “avowyng” means “vow”, and represents the main theme of the poem, the accomplishment of vows made by the protagonists: King Arthur, Sir Gawain, Sir Kay and Sir Baldwin are in Inglewood Forest, and King Arthur vows to kill a wild boar before the next day. He then orders Gawain to keep the guard at the Tarn Wadling during the night, which will be his vow. Kay’s vow is to ride until the next day looking for adventure. Baldwin’s vow is threefold: never to be jealous of any woman or to refuse food to anyone, and never to fear death. The rest of the poem tells how the knights deal with their vows, and Arthur, Gawain and Baldwin (but not Kay, who is captured by Sir Menealfe and then rescued by Gawain) in the end are successful. The second part of the poem is entirely dedicated to Baldwin’s accomplishment of his vows, and he becomes thus the focal figure of the poem, representing a kind of chivalry that ties “apparent

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<sup>81</sup> Rogers Gillian, Diane Speed, David Griffith and John Withrington, “Folk Romance”, in W.J.R. Barron, ed., *The Arthur of the English, the Arthurian Legend in Medieval English Life and Literature*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001, p. 207.

<sup>82</sup> Newstead, p. 63.

daring and recklessness to rationality and calculation” in his accomplishment of the vows, which made it more appealing for a bourgeois audience.<sup>83</sup>

*The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* was composed about 1450 in the East Midlands and is preserved in a single sixteenth-century manuscript (Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodleian 11951).<sup>84</sup> The tale is a variation on the famous theme of the “Loathly Lady”, that appears also in other English tales –like Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath’s Tale* and Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* – but also in other vernacular versions in Irish, French and Old Norse.<sup>85</sup> The story is that of a young knight who has to solve a riddle, “What women most want”, and is helped in his quest by an old and ugly lady who gives the answer to the riddle (that is, sovereignty) in exchange for the promise to marry her. After the wedding, the ugly lady turns out to be a beautiful young girl - after she has obtained a proof of having sovereignty over her husband, who makes her decide whether she will be fair by day and ugly by night or vice versa - victim of a spell that could be broken only by a courteous knight who would submit his will to her, and the couple lives happy ever after. In this poem the plot is complicated by the fact that the quest should be Arthur’s duty, because he has met with a knight – Sir Grom Somer Joure – who was about to kill him, claiming that the king has given the lands which rightfully belong to him to Gawain. King Arthur has his life spared, but he will have to tell Sir Gromer “what women most want” in a year. Gawain helps Arthur find the answer, and offers to marry the ugly lady who reveals Arthur the solution of the riddle, giving once again proof of his courtesy and loyalty, given that he will be subjected to public scorn the day of the wedding. However in the end he is rewarded for his noble act and lives happily with the beautiful girl. The same story is told in another text dedicated to Gawain, *The Marriage of Sir Gawain*, a ballad that was probably composed in the fifteenth century but that

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<sup>83</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 116

<sup>84</sup> Newstead, p. 65.

<sup>85</sup> Newstead, p. 65.

can be found only in the Percy Folio.<sup>86</sup> Half of the poem is missing because of the mutilations to which the manuscript was subject, but it is not difficult to reconstruct the plot confronting it with other versions of the “Loathly Lady” story, here retold in a simpler way more apt to the ballad form.<sup>87</sup> Hahn notes that the widespread success of the Loathly Lady story and its connection with Gawain through space, time and literary genres “bears witness to Gawain’s huge celebrity with an astonishing variety of audiences, and across centuries of enormous cultural change.”<sup>88</sup>

*The Jeaste of Sir Gawain* is a poem preserved in only one manuscript, Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodleian 21835, and was probably composed in the second half of the fifteenth century in the South Midlands; unfortunately, the first lines of the poem are missing.<sup>89</sup> The plot is a mixture of two episodes drawn from the First Continuation of Chrétien’s *Perceval*:<sup>90</sup> Gawain finds a beautiful lady in a “pavylion”<sup>91</sup> and the two are having fun together, when the father of the girl arrives and starts a fight with Gawain; Gawain wins but then has to fight also with the three brothers of the girl. He defeats two of them, but the third brother - called Brandles, from the French “Brandelis” - seems to be almost invincible: none has the better on the other, so the two decide to postpone the feud to another day, but the final duel never occurs. The English version cuts off the final episode of the story, where the fight between Gawain and Brandelis ends thanks to the girl who shows Gawain the son born from their love, Ginglain, and obtains peace between her brother and her lover.<sup>92</sup> It is interesting to see how the motif of romantic love is not at all at the centre of the poem, unlike

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<sup>86</sup> Newstead, p. 66.

<sup>87</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 359.

<sup>88</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 360.

<sup>89</sup> Newstead, p. 67.

<sup>90</sup> Newstead, p. 67.

<sup>91</sup> *The Jeaste of Sir Gawain*, in Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 397.

<sup>92</sup> Newstead, p. 67.

what one could think from its premises; on the contrary, the pivotal elements of the poem are “individual combat and martial prowess”,<sup>93</sup> around which much of the story is built.

*The Greene Knight* is once again preserved only in the Percy Folio, and was composed about 1500 in South Midland dialect; its plot is basically the same as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but the matter is obviously not treated with the same skill of the Gawain-poet.<sup>94</sup> What is curious about this poem is that the “Greene Knight” is not a mysterious and otherworldly figure, but a “real” person, Sir Bredbeddle of the West Country, whose wife is in love with Gawain (even if the two have never met). He is transformed into a green knight by his wife’s mother, who is a sorceress, and then goes to Arthur’s court to defy Gawain. The castle of Lord Bertilak is here replaced by Sir Bredbeddle’s house, that has been identified with Castle Hutton in Somersetshire.<sup>95</sup> Another particular is changed from the original source: the green girdle that Lady Bertilak gives Gawain is here replaced by a “white lace” that – the text says – was later adopted by the knights of the Order of the Bath, “popularly assumed to have been founded by Henry IV in 1399”<sup>96</sup> and this detail may reflect “the fact that in the fifteenth century new members were expected to wear a white silk shoulderknot until their first notable feat of arms.”<sup>97</sup> (The allusion to the Order of the Bath could have been also an attempt to imitate the reference to the “Order of the Garter” found in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.) All the mystery and suspense that inform *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are lost here, and substituted by a more “realistic” setting and less sophisticated structure: the three episodes of seduction of the original version are in fact reduced to a single one, and no

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<sup>93</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, pp. 393-394.

<sup>94</sup> Newstead, p. 57.

<sup>95</sup> Newstead, p. 58.

<sup>96</sup> Bennet, Michael J., “The Historical Background”, in Derek Brewer, ed., *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997, p. 90.

<sup>97</sup> Newstead, p. 58.

parallel is being drawn between the lady's seduction and the hunting activity of her supernatural husband.<sup>98</sup>

*The Turke and Sir Gawain* is a poem preserved only in the Percy Folio, written around 1500 in North or North Midlands dialect and probably intended for oral recitation;<sup>99</sup> unfortunately it is in the part of the manuscript that was being used to "light the fire", so about half of the poem is missing,<sup>100</sup> as with another poem, *King Arthur and King Cornwall*. The poem combines the motif of the "Beheading Game" with that of the "otherworldly visit" to a foreign king: the story begins with the same scene as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, with a stranger entering King Arthur's court while he sits at the table; this time he is not a "Green Knight" but an exotic "Turke" (Turk) who asks for a duel. Gawain accepts and strikes the first blow, but then the story has an unexpected turn, because the Turke becomes Gawain's companion in a series of adventures where he continuously tests the knight, making him suffer hunger, fight with giants, and so on, but always being at his side and helping him in difficult situations. He finally asks Gawain to be beheaded by him, which Gawain does with some hesitation, but his blow transforms him into a knight, Sir Gromer, who is made Knight of the Round Table by Arthur. It is interesting to note that "the Turk's role as the helpful attendant of the hero finds no counterpart in the various versions of the challenge story",<sup>101</sup> while other details of the story can be found also in the French poem *Pèlerinage de Charlemagne* (ca. 1140),<sup>102</sup> even if this text is not the direct source of *The Turke and Sir Gawain*, but

since similar episodes are scattered in other Arthurian romances and tales, it is likely that these analogues, both Carolingian and Arthurian, derive ultimately from a story about the visit of a king to a rival monarch's domain in the Otherworld<sup>103</sup>

as we will see also in the next poem, *King Arthur and King Cornwall*.

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<sup>98</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 311.

<sup>99</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 337.

<sup>100</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 337.

<sup>101</sup> Newstead, p. 59.

<sup>102</sup> Newstead, p. 59.

<sup>103</sup> Newstead, p. 59.

*King Arthur and King Cornwall* is one of the ballads preserved in the Percy Folio; it has probably Northern origins, but as with other texts preserved in the Percy Folio the modernization of the spelling makes it difficult to identify the exact provenance of the poem.<sup>104</sup> The plot of the poem is similar to that of the *Pèlerinage de Charlemagne*; however, this poem is not its direct source, since probably the motif of “a king’s visit to a rival monarch with supernatural powers was attached to Arthur as well as to Charlemagne.”<sup>105</sup> The story tells of King Arthur’s search for King Cornwall, after Guinevere tells her husband that a king possessing a more beautiful Round Table exists, without saying exactly where. Arthur is accompanied in his quest all over Britain to find this wonderful king by Sir Gawain, Tristram, Sir Murramples and Sir Bredbeddle. After many travels in strange lands, they arrive at King Cornwall’s court; the king however is not a courteous host, and even claims to have had a daughter from Guinevere. Arthur swears to kill him, and the other knights similarly swear to take from King Cornwall various magical objects he said to possess; in the end they succeed. Even if the tale is a ballad intended for oral recitation, the poet shows some acquaintance with the Arthurian matter, since he puts among King Arthur’s companions no less than Sir Bredbeddle, a character that we have already met in *The Greene Knight*, where he was exactly Gawain’s antagonist.<sup>106</sup> Moreover, the motif of the “vows” made by the knight to conquer objects belonging to Cornwall openly resembles *The Avowyng of Arthur*, though the literary quality of the narrative is lower than that of this text.<sup>107</sup>

*The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawain* is the only one of the Gawain poems written in Middle Scots. It was composed around 1500 and is preserved only in a volume printed in Edinburgh in 1508 by Chepman and Millar, the first printers in Scotland.<sup>108</sup> It can be considered chronologically as the limit of the period here taken into consideration, also

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<sup>104</sup> Gillian, Speed and Griffith, “Folk Romance”, p. 219.

<sup>105</sup> Newstead, p. 68.

<sup>106</sup> Gillian, Speed and Griffith, “Folk Romance”, p. 217.

<sup>107</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, pp. 419-420.

<sup>108</sup> Newstead, p. 62.

considering that this is the only poem that has been preserved in a printed volume; even if the composition of the poem is earlier and clearly makes reference to a certain kind of medieval poetry, the fact that it survived in printed form reminds us that the period called “Middle Ages” is ending (as it is universally known, the formal date that marks the end of the Middle Ages is 1492, so almost sixteen years before *Gologras and Gawain* was printed). As in *The Jeaste of Sir Gawain*, the plot of the story is made up of two episodes from the First Continuation of Chrétien’s *Perceval*.<sup>109</sup> The main episode of the story is built around the figure of Gologras, the lord of a castle who refuses to submit to King Arthur. He sends Ywain, Lancelot and Gawain to Gologras to obtain his submission, but he refuses; his castle is thus besieged, and Gawain has the better of him, but Gologras still refuses to submit to Arthur. He then proposes to Gawain to go to Arthur’s castle together pretending that he is the winner; Gawain courteously accepts, but then Gologras reveals to the court who the real victor is and finally accepts Arthur’s lordship. The theme of the “pilgrimage” to the court of a wealthy and powerful king that we find in *Gologras* is the same as *King Arthur and King Cornwall*, and is probably the result of a “combination of motifs already traditionally linked to Arthur” other than to Charlemagne and ultimately derive from Celtic sources.<sup>110</sup>

After having examined the Gawain poems from the point of view of chronology, I will provide a geographical overview of the poems, trying to establish whether the poems can be considered homogeneous on the basis of their geographical provenance and setting. Hahn suggests that one of the elements that justifies the unity of the group is exactly the geography of these tales, since almost all of them “set their adventures in or near Carlisle, a city with long-standing Arthurian associations.”<sup>111</sup> Carlisle, a city still existing today, is set in Cumbria, a territory of North-Western England that shares its Northern border with Scotland. In many of these tales, Carlisle is the place where King Arthur’s court is situated. The adventures to

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<sup>109</sup> Newstead, p. 62.

<sup>110</sup> Newstead, p. 68.

<sup>111</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 29.



which Gawain takes part are often set in the forest of Inglewood, or at the Tarn Wadling, both placed in Cumbria.<sup>112</sup> The fact that Cumbria was a “border territory”, populated by an audience “prepared for war at all times and bred on tales of military prowess” made it an ideal setting for chivalric tales.<sup>113</sup> Adjacent territories are often mentioned with precision in these poems, including Galloway, the “Kingdom of Gawain”, that is also often mentioned though not the main place of action.<sup>114</sup> Cumbria is also the probable place of origin for most of the popular tales and ballads that form the last group of poems identified above, because even if the original dialect of their composers is not recorded by the manuscript in which they are preserved, “linguistic evidence in the poems points to the North, and perhaps Cumberland itself.”<sup>115</sup> The poems settled in Cumberland, near places such as Carlisle, the Tarn Wadling and Inglewood forest are in particular *The Awntyrs off Arthur*, *The Avowyng of Arthur*, *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, *The Marriage of Sir Gawain*, *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle* and *The Carle of Carlisle*, so more or less half the poems. The main exceptions are represented by *Libeaus Desconus*, that places Arthur’s court in Somerset, at Glastonbury, a place with numerous Arthurian connections;<sup>116</sup> *Ywain and Gawain*, that follows its source and places the actions in Wales, at Cardiff; and finally *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, where the main setting is in the north-west Midlands of England (Gawain has in fact to follow a “well-defined route through North Wales, across the estuary of the Dee into Wirral.”)<sup>117</sup> In two cases the definition of the setting is quite problematic: in *Gologras and Gawain*, the King and his knights are on a pilgrimage toward the Holy Land, and on their way they stop at Gologras’s house, located “ostensibly” in “France west of the Rhone”;<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 30.

<sup>113</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 29.

<sup>114</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 30.

<sup>115</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>116</sup> Ashe, Geoffrey, “Glastonbury”, in Norris J. Lacy, ed., *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia*, New York: Garland, p. 198.

<sup>117</sup> Elliot, Ralph, “Landscape and Geography”, in Derek Brewer, ed., *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997, p. 113.

<sup>118</sup> Hahn, “Gawain and Popular Chivalric Romance in Britain”, p. 227.

however, “the descriptions of landscapes and fortifications , here and in the second part, conform strikingly to the border areas between Scotland and England, where the poem originates.”<sup>119</sup> The other poem characterized by a “mixed” setting is *The Greene Knight*, because it places Arthur’s court at Carlisle but also in Delamere Forest, in Cheshire, and the house of the Green Knight in Somersetshire.<sup>120</sup> Finally, in other poems the setting cannot be Carlisle for obvious reasons, such as in *King Arthur and King Cornwall*, where Arthur and his fellow knights are involved in a journey to Cornwall; it is not easy to establish the initial setting of the journey since the first lines and other parts of the poem are missing, and king Arthur is generally defined as “King of Little Britain” without further specification, and probably in open contrast with the king of Cornwall. It is true however that once again the setting is that of a “border zone”, adjacent to a traditionally Celtic territory.<sup>121</sup> The same can be said for the setting of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, where the lands crossed by Gawain are those bordering North Wales; the concept of a “border” setting for the Gawain romances is thus generally respected, even if the seat of Arthur’s court is placed in different regions; a consistent group of poems however prefer to place the action in the North of England, and in particular near Carlisle. In other poems however the setting seems to be not an important element at all, for instance in *The Turke and Sir Gawain* and *The Jeaste of Sir Gawain*.

From the point of view of production, we meet once again with a mixed picture, and in a situation similar to the one described above: the majority of the poems result from linguistic evidence to come from the North of England, with some notable exceptions. The poems composed in a Northern dialect are *Ywain and Gawain*, *The Awntyrs off Arthur*, *The Avowyng of Arthur*, *King Arthur and King Cornwall* and *The Turke and Sir Gawain*, plus *Gologras and Gawain* that is written in Middle Scots. Other poems come from the Northwest of England:

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<sup>119</sup> Hahn, “Gawain and Popular Chivalric Romance in Britain”, p. 227.

<sup>120</sup> Newstead, p. 58.

<sup>121</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 419.

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Carle of Carlisle* and *The Marriage of Sir Gawain*. Finally, the remaining texts have mixed origins: *Libeaus Desconus* is written in a Southern dialect (but the manuscripts in which it is preserved come from different parts of England), *The Greene Knight* and *The Jeaste of Sir Gawain* come from the Southern Midlands, *The Wedding of Sir Gawain* is written in East Midlands dialect and *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle* in West Midlands dialect. It is also true that especially for the Percy Folio texts it is extremely difficult to identify the origin of the poems. It is not easy then to trace a homogeneous map of the provenance of these poems, but it is true that a consistent number of poems come from the North and Northwest regions of England, and from Scotland in the case of *Gologras and Gawain*; the hypothesis of a more Northern diffusion of the figure of Gawain, due to his association with Galloway and Scotland can be supported, given that also the exceptions are taken into consideration.

In conclusion, we have seen that the whole of the Gawain poems can be divided into three main groups according to the chronological criterion, those written before 1350, those written around 1375 and those written in the fifteenth century, while from a geographic point of view the majority of the texts merge into two main groups, those written in Northern and Northwestern regions and those coming from other parts of England. The chronological aspect is probably the one that raises more doubts about the internal cohesion of the “Gawain romances”, since they have been produced over such a wide span of time. The picture is further complicated by the fact that for some of the texts we do not have the original sources, but only later compilations that gather texts of various ages but that were still in vogue well after the time considered, such as the texts contained in the Percy Folio. The picture that we have of these texts then is a fragmented one, and everything seems to go against any definition of unity and cohesion to describe them. But still, we have to consider the fact that even if the period of production is a wide one, it is nonetheless true that these poems can all

be included into the wider category of the texts written in “Middle English”, that is, that phase of the English language included between 1100 and 1500.<sup>122</sup> The fact that these texts were produced in different times then seems to be not so disrupting for the unity of the whole if we think that they fall into a category of texts that by definition covers a wide span of time, and includes heterogeneous texts in terms of genre and production (as we will see in more detail in the next section of this chapter, dedicated to genre). Moreover, we have pointed out the different sub-groups that can be outlined, and once the internal differences are considered it is easier to acknowledge also the continuity among the texts themselves: in the first group, where the earlier texts are gathered, we can see *in nuce* the future developments of the figure of Gawain; the texts contained in this group are either directly or in part drawn from French sources, and Gawain is not the main protagonist there nor the ultimate perfect warrior that we will find in later texts, but his only presence seems to determine the success of the text itself among English audiences. The second group of texts is more mixed, and can be seen as transitory: for the first time we find a text – one of the best products of Middle English literature – entirely devoted to his adventures, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but that seems to be almost playing upon Gawain’s reputation as a perfect knight; it is as if the consequences of the internal contradictions of chivalry were reflected in Gawain’s behaviour. In *The Avowyng* on the contrary we find a more traditional depiction of Gawain, probably due also to the less sophisticated nature of the poem, but this is the image of the knight that affirms itself in the later poems. The last group is probably the most problematic one because it contains extremely heterogeneous texts, not always easy to date or partly lost due to the scarcity of sources, but that attest to Gawain’s positive reputation in England among mixed audiences - sometimes overtly popular as in the case of the texts contained in the Percy Folio - and even well into the seventeenth century. The chronological distance that separates *Ywain*

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<sup>122</sup> Horobin, Simon, “Middle English Language and Poetry”, in Saunders, Corinne, ed., *A Companion to Medieval Poetry*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, p. 181.

*and Gawain* from *Gologras and Gawain* could thus be omitted if contextualized into the wider picture of the development of Middle English Arthurian romance and in the history of the genre; in the next section dedicated to the matter of the “genre” in the Gawain poems I will then try to go more in depth into this fundamental aspect and propose a classification - and possible unification - of the poems based on their literary genre.

### **2.3 Gawain “Romances” or Gawain Poems?**

The main aim of this section will be that of providing a discussion of the romance genre, and to outline the problems connected to this term, not only in the field of Middle English literature but in the broader corpus of medieval poetry; on the basis of such a discussion, I will try to analyse what we have labelled so far “Gawain romances” or “Gawain poems”, and try to determine whether it is correct or not to use the term “romances” in reference to them. As we will see, the task is not an easy one, since the term “romance” itself is highly problematic and does not provide an easy definition of the kind of poetry we can label with this term; the definition of “Middle English romance” seems to be even more misleading, given the variety of texts which are usually designed with this term – among which we find also the poems which form the object of my study.

A fundamental essay that must be cited when talking of romance is the chapter included by Erich Auerbach in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946), where he provides an analysis of a perfect example of romance, Chrétien de Troyes’s *Yvain*. Auerbach thinks that courtly romance as conceived by Chrétien de Troyes was basically “a self-portrayal of feudal knighthood with its mores and ideals”.<sup>123</sup> He recognizes also the basic pattern of the romance in the series of *aventures* (adventures) that the knight-protagonist has to face; the term *aventure* in fact does not indicate something “accidental” or

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<sup>123</sup> Auerbach, Erich, *Mimesis*, transl. by Willard R. Trask, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003, p. 131.

“unstable, peripheral, disordered”,<sup>124</sup> but something essential to the hero’s display of his virtues: “trial through adventure is the real meaning of the knight’s ideal existence”<sup>125</sup>, since “the world of knightly proving is a world of adventure”,<sup>126</sup> specifically designed to provide adventures to the knight. The protagonists of such adventures are always members of the nobility, the “chivalric-courtly” society to which knights belong;<sup>127</sup> the adventures of which he is the protagonist generally revolve around the two only activities that are considered “worthy of a knight”, that is, love and feats of arms.<sup>128</sup> For Auerbach then there was little or no doubt about the nature of romance: it was the product of the courtly culture embodied by the figure of the knight, who was the protagonist of a series of adventures involving fights and love affairs in which his qualities could be properly tested. However, this definition of romance given by Auerbach – basically, that of a narrative dealing with “aristocratic *personae* and involving combat and/or love” written after 1100 -<sup>129</sup> was later put into question by scholars such as John Finlayson, who recognizes the “ambiguity, or even vagueness”<sup>130</sup> of the term “romance”.

According to Finlayson, confusion arises from the history of the term itself: originally, it signified both “a language derived from popular Latin” and “a translation from Latin into the vulgar tongue”, but was later extended in scope by Wace “to include any work in the vernacular”.<sup>131</sup> From the thirteenth century, it designated a particular type of “fictitious narrative”, written in romance languages, and this is the sense that later predominated.<sup>132</sup> Moreover, confusion about what could be labelled “romance” – especially in reference to Middle English poetry - started to arise according to Finlayson “in the enthusiastic work of

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<sup>124</sup> Auerbach, p. 135.

<sup>125</sup> Auerbach, p. 135.

<sup>126</sup> Auerbach, p. 136.

<sup>127</sup> Auerbach p. 139.

<sup>128</sup> Auerbach p. 140.

<sup>129</sup> Finlayson, “Definitions of Middle English Romance”, in Stephen Shepherd, ed. *Middle English Romances*, New York: Norton, 1995, p. 429.

<sup>130</sup> Finlayson, p. 429.

<sup>131</sup> Finlayson, p. 430.

<sup>132</sup> Finlayson, p. 430.

early antiquarians and commentators, such as Hurd, Scott and Hellis”, but for him, such a term “is clearly useful and meaningful only as a bibliographical classification, designating medieval, chivalric, fictitious narrative.”<sup>133</sup> For Finlayson then “romance” is a misleading term, that cannot be taken as representative of a “closely defined *genre*”<sup>134</sup> as it traditionally happened. However, he allows that the term can be of some use, given that we “recognize clearly that the romance probably is not a monolithic genre but, like the novel, can be divided into a number of largely different types” and try to “find another name or names for those poems which do not fit the proposed definitions.”<sup>135</sup> He allows then that we use the term but that we also take into consideration the extreme variety that characterizes the Middle English romances, defined as “a large body of narrative poems, dealing in varied ways with a considerable range of subjects, which literary historians and their dependent critics have agreed to call *romances*.”<sup>136</sup>

Finlayson then goes into a discussion of Middle English romances, and outlines some of their common features: they are almost always derived from French sources (and when they do not derive from French they draw largely from Latin chronicles and saints’ lives), but compared to them, they deal less with love affairs and more with deeds of valour: “it is true that love-making plays a rather insignificant part in most English narratives. It is also true that physical activities, provided by military encounters, are probably the most important element in English ‘romances’”.<sup>137</sup> This is also why, according to Finlayson, English authors of romances did not distinguish between the epic of *chansons de geste* and the courtly *romans* when choosing French texts to translate or adapt. He also highlights a basic difference between French and English “romance” that allows for such unification: French romance was the expression of a courtly and sophisticated *milieu*, and those in medieval England who

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<sup>133</sup> Finlayson, p. 434.

<sup>134</sup> Finlayson, p. 434.

<sup>135</sup> Finlayson, p. 435.

<sup>136</sup> Finlayson, p. 429.

<sup>137</sup> Finlayson, p. 435.

could read French (which “was still the language of refinement and culture in the fourteenth century”)<sup>138</sup> would rather read directly the original texts than their renditions in English, a language that “was still often regarded in the fourteenth century (and later) as a language unsuited to the expression of refined sentiments”; obviously this means that the audience to which such romances were directed was a different one, one which could not read French- a less aristocratic one.<sup>139</sup> This is also why most Middle English romances cannot be compared, according to Finlayson, with the refinement of the French ones, with few exceptions (namely *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Chaucer’s *The Knight’s Tale*).<sup>140</sup> The imitation of French models then was a practice that was due to the desire to “assimilate [...] the prestige of a superior civilization through the imitation of its culture.”<sup>141</sup>

Finlayson then enumerates the criteria which allow us to distinguish the *romance* from the *chanson de geste* narratives. The difference is on the emphasis which they place upon common elements such as “courage, skills in arms, loyalty and generosity”, all characteristics of the aristocratic class to which these narratives were originally directed:<sup>142</sup> while the *chanson de geste* is more heroic in tone, and deals basically with war, the *romance* is more courtly and deals with moral concepts of *courtoisie* and *mesure* that are attached to the hero.<sup>143</sup> However, the biggest difference between *chanson de geste* and *romance* is to be found in “the concept of the hero”:<sup>144</sup> while in the *chanson* the hero is one in a group, a warrior of a larger army and a member of the society he fights for, the *romance* hero is regarded more as an individual character than as part of a larger group: “both *chanson de geste* and *romance* heroes are known through their prowess, but while the former employs his

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<sup>138</sup> Finlayson, p. 436.

<sup>139</sup> Finlayson, p. 436.

<sup>140</sup> Finlayson, p. 436.

<sup>141</sup> Finlayson, p. 436.

<sup>142</sup> Finlayson, p. 437.

<sup>143</sup> Finlayson, pp. 437-438.

<sup>144</sup> Finlayson, p. 438.



skill in a public context, the latter does so solely or usually in pursuit of a private ideal.”<sup>145</sup> The romance hero was the product of idealization, and his “code of behaviour” was more a convention displayed in literary texts than a practice really followed in actual courts.<sup>146</sup> To affirm this is to go back to Auerbach and give substance to his observations about courtly romance: “The basic paradigm of the *romance* is expressed in the formula, ‘The knight rides out alone to seek adventure’”.<sup>147</sup> This last observation brings Finlayson to give a “basic definition” of *romance*: “a tale in which a knight achieves great feats of arms, almost solely for his own *los et pris* in a series of adventures which have no social, political or religious motivation and little or no connection with medieval actuality. [...] The basic romance is the *romance of adventure*.”<sup>148</sup> This is the basic patten of Chretien’s *romans courtois*, but also of any other romance: “adventure, then, is the real core of romance, whether it be popular or courtly.”<sup>149</sup>

Finlayson finds thus the essence of romance in two basic and correlated elements: the concept of “hero” as an individual distinguished from the group, and the episodic nature of the narrative he is involved in, since the series of adventures he has to face is the ground on which his moral - more than physical - qualities will have to be tested. Other features, such as the presence of supernatural elements and the marvellous,<sup>150</sup> for example, but also of courtly love affairs<sup>151</sup> are important but not necessary in romance.

Finlayson’s definition of romance includes also the Middle English romances and re-elaborates the early definition provided by Auerbach; however, this definition has been further challenged by scholars such as Schmidt and Jacobs, for whom the extreme variety

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<sup>145</sup> Finlayson, p. 439.

<sup>146</sup> Finlayson, p. 439.

<sup>147</sup> Finlayson, p. 440.

<sup>148</sup> Finlayson, pp. 440-1.

<sup>149</sup> Finlayson, p. 442.

<sup>150</sup> Finlayson, p. 441.

<sup>151</sup> Finlayson, p. 444.

typical of the Middle English romances excludes the existence of a univocally defined romance genre:

The medieval English romances are stories in verse which deal with the adventures of noble men and women and which end happily. If the definition is vague, it goes as far as the evidence permits. It is hardly possible to 'characterise' the romances more precisely, so miscellaneous in their character, and while they can be 'classified' according to their narrative material, length, verse-form or other prominent features, they exhibit so much variety that some critics have questioned whether it is possible to speak of a romance genre at all.<sup>152</sup>

Another scholar who has rejected the idea of a clearly defined genre called "romance" is Stephen W. A. Shepherd, who writes:

For some time it has been a commonplace for editors of Middle English "romances" to remark upon the inadequacy of inclusive definitions for the ostensible genre; the one hundred or more so-called romances in Middle English present an extraordinary variety of form and theme to which no single critical paradigm is usefully equal.<sup>153</sup>

For Shepherd, we have no more than a "perceived emphasis" into which we can operate distinctions, rather than the "standard" proposed by authors such as Auerbach and Finlayson.<sup>154</sup> A similar idea has been expressed by Donald B. Sands, for whom there is "no homogeneous essence which would make possible a brief and valid description of the genre."<sup>155</sup>

The question is then if we can even talk of "romance" in reference to the Middle English fictional narratives – the "leading genre" in medieval England -<sup>156</sup> given the lack of unification affecting these narratives. Even if some scholars are critical on the term however, others seem less preoccupied with the differences that exist among these poems, and prefer to highlight the common features that allow us to at least provisionally term them "romances". Finlayson for example, even when questioning the use of the term romance in reference to certain texts, acknowledged also the existence of a body of "Middle English romances"

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<sup>152</sup> Schmidt, A.V.C. and Nicholas Jacobs, eds. *Medieval English Romances*. New York: Holmes and Meier, 1980, vol.2, p.1.

<sup>153</sup> Shepherd, Stephen H. A., ed. *Middle English Romances*. New York: Norton, 1995, p. xii.

<sup>154</sup> Shepherd, p. 2.

<sup>155</sup> Sands, p. 1.

<sup>156</sup> Schmidt and Jacobs, p.1.

sharing common characteristics.<sup>157</sup> The evidence of a common definition seems to be then more based on the works themselves, which, even if not all completely adherent to a pre-given “prototype” of romance as Chrétien’s *Yvain* could be, show in fact a number of features sufficient to ascribe them to the genre. It can be useful in this respect to read what Diane Speed says:

The romances are a very diverse literary entity, and much scholarly endeavour had been expended in searching for definitions of the genre which would take account of the varied features of all the works so grouped. What is extraordinary in the circumstances is the high degree of unanimity with which scholars have identified the works they consider it appropriate to place under this heading.<sup>158</sup>

What are then the common characteristics that can be useful to decide whether a poem is a “romance” or not? First of all, they have all been written after 1280, “the earliest extant Middle English romances” being the fragment of the Cambridge MS containing *King Horn* and *Floris and Blanchifleur*.<sup>159</sup> The most obvious common characteristic is that they are written in verse, “prose romances being of negligible importance if we except the works of Malory.”<sup>160</sup> They are written in various verse forms, “all the chief verse-forms of the English Middle Ages”: the alliterative long line, octosyllabic couplet and tail-rhyme.<sup>161</sup> The fact that they were in verse is closely related to the fact that they were intended primarily as a form of entertainment,<sup>162</sup> and they were designed “in the first instance to be heard”;<sup>163</sup> this is also why they are “typically anonymous” and difficult to date.<sup>164</sup> The “leisure” function of these poems is very important: “Like much medieval literature, the romances were not meant to be read in private to oneself. They were recited to an audience perhaps in the hall of a manor, more likely perhaps in the large room of a tavern.”<sup>165</sup> Their function was then that of “entertainment

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<sup>157</sup> Finlayson, p. 429.

<sup>158</sup> Speed, Diane, ed., *Medieval English Romances*, Sydney: Department of English, University of Sydney, 1987, p. 11.

<sup>159</sup> Pearsall, Derek “The Development of Middle English Romance”, in Derek Brewer, ed., *Studies in Medieval English Romances, Some New Approaches*, Bury St Edmunds: St Edmundsbury Press, 1991, p. 11.

<sup>160</sup> Schmidt and Jacobs, p. 1.

<sup>161</sup> Schmidt and Jacobs, p.1.

<sup>162</sup> Speed, p. 11.

<sup>163</sup> Schmidt and Jacobs, p. 2.

<sup>164</sup> Speed, p. 11

<sup>165</sup> Sands, p. 7.

and edification”,<sup>166</sup> and their intended audience was a mixed one: “romance can have an appeal for many people, regardless of rank, or even of education, because it deals basically with concerns that are common to most of humanity.”<sup>167</sup>

From what we have seen in the previous section, these characteristics are commonly found in most Gawain romances: they have all been written after 1280, in all of the three verse forms mentioned above (alliterative long line, octosyllabic couplet and tail-rhyme) and even if we do not have direct evidence of their function or audience we can assume from details such as the surviving of some of the poems in later manuscripts that they were often popular narratives that could appeal to very different audiences – from the most sophisticated readers of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to the less literate listening to ballads such as *The Carle of Carlisle*. Moreover, there seems to be no difficulty on the part of the scholars who have dedicated their studies to the Gawain poems in placing them within the boundaries of the romance genre – always given that the internal variety of subject, metre, production and so on that they show are typical of the wider category of the “Middle English romance”. It is useful however to provide a classification of these poems to account for such internal variety, starting from important matters such as the formal structure of the poems and their subject matter – criteria for which we have textual evidence, unlike other matters such as the possible function or audience of these poems, for which there is no direct evidence. The first classification of the Gawain romances that I will provide is thus based on the verse-form in which they are written: the tail-rhyme stanzas, the rhymed couplets, the alliterative lines and the ballad stanzas.

Among the Gawain poems, *Ywain and Gawain* is the only one written in octosyllabic rhymed couplets, a metre that was very popular in the fourteenth century and can be found

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<sup>166</sup> Speed, p. 12.

<sup>167</sup> Speed, p. 13.

also in other poems such as *Richard Coeur de Lion* and Gower's *Confessio Amantis*.<sup>168</sup> This metrical form is also the closest to that of the original French romances<sup>169</sup> – and the poem itself is a rendition of Chrétien's *Yvain* – although the poet gave more importance to stress than to the count of syllables in comparison to his source.<sup>170</sup>

The tail-rhyme derived from the French lyric, and was especially used by minstrel because it was easy to memorize.<sup>171</sup> Among the Gawain romances, those written in tail-rhymes are: *Libeaus Desconus*, *The Greene Knight*, *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*, *The Avowyng of Arthur*, *The Turke and Gawain* and *The Jeaste of Sir Gawain*. *Libeaus Desconus* is written in twelve-line tail-rhyme stanzas, and the tail-rhyme scheme is “skillfully varied” by the poet to avoid the monotonous effect that it can sometimes have.<sup>172</sup> *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* is written in six-line stanzas rhymed *aabccb*, “with the *a* and *c* couplets written in longer lines [...] and the *b*-lines shorter.”<sup>173</sup> The same rhyming scheme is employed also in *The Turke and Gawain* and *The Jeaste of Sir Gawain*. In *The Greene Knight*, the rhyme scheme is not easy to detect, since it is divided in six-line stanzas, but half the poem has a potential rhyme scheme involving groups of twelve lines,<sup>174</sup> so the poem could be a reworking of an earlier twelve-line stanzas romance.<sup>175</sup> In the other tail-rhyme romances the number of lines for each stanza varies: *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle* is written in twelve-line stanzas rhyming *aabccbddbeeb*, even if this is not totally consistent throughout the poem.<sup>176</sup> In *The Avowyng*

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<sup>168</sup> Friedman, Albert and Harrington, Norman, eds., *Yvain and Gawain*, London: Oxford University Press, 1964, p. xlvi.

<sup>169</sup> Mills, Maldwyn, ed., *Yvain and Gawain, Sir Percyvell of Gales, The Anturs of Arther*. London: J. M. Dent, 1992. p. xi.

<sup>170</sup> Mills, *Yvain and Gawain, Sir Percyvell of Gales, The Anturs of Arther*, p. xi.

<sup>171</sup> Loomis, *The Development of Arthurian Romance*, p. 134.

<sup>172</sup> Mehl, Dieter, *The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968, p. 77.

<sup>173</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 44.

<sup>174</sup> Speed, p. 234.

<sup>175</sup> Speed, p. 234.

<sup>176</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 84.

of *Arthur* the sixteen-line stanzas rhyme *aaabcccbbdddbeeeb*, and are sometimes linked also by alliteration, but it is not a structural element as in other alliterative poems.<sup>177</sup>

The alliterative poems “differ from the others not only as to metrical form but also in vocabulary and geographical origin”;<sup>178</sup> they sometimes reflected a more aristocratic and sophisticated origin than any of the tail-rhyme poems, as in the case of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and another alliterative Arthurian poem, the *Alliterative Morte Arthur*.<sup>179</sup> These poems were part of the so-called “Alliterative Revival” that refers to the continuation of the old Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse, a tradition that had never really died in English poetry and that survived through the ages also in other works such as Layamon’s *Brut* – it would thus be more correct, according to Loomis, to call this revival “the Alliterative Survival”-<sup>180</sup> and that after a rich flourishing especially in the fourteenth century ended by the early sixteenth century.<sup>181</sup> However, the corpus of alliterative poems that have come to us – two of which, *Piers Plowman* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are among the most significant Middle English poems – is itself problematic given the large span of time (three centuries) during which alliterative poems were produced and the variety displayed by the numerous poems forming this corpus.<sup>182</sup> Derek Pearsall however has shown that there is sufficient formal evidence to give substance to an “Alliterative Revival”: there was a “continuum” of alliterative writing in England that never stopped from the Anglo-Saxon times, that interrupts between 1250 (the possible date of completion of Layamon’s *Brut*) and 1350, when writing in alliterative verse reappeared, and that can be taken as the start date for such Revival.<sup>183</sup> Moreover, he recognizes also a regional identity that unifies the poems of the Alliterative

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<sup>177</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 116.

<sup>178</sup> Loomis, p. 147.

<sup>179</sup> Loomis, p. 147.

<sup>180</sup> Loomis, p. 147.

<sup>181</sup> Scattergood, John, *The Lost Tradition, Essays on Middle English Alliterative Poetry*, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000, p.11.

<sup>182</sup> Lawton, David, “Middle English Alliterative Poetry: an Introduction”, in David Lawton, ed., *Middle English Alliterative Poetry and Its Literary Background, Seven Essays*, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1982, p. 1.

<sup>183</sup> Pearsall, Derek, “The Alliterative Revival: Origins and Social Backgrounds”, in David Lawton, ed., *Middle English Alliterative Poetry and Its Literary Background, Seven Essays*, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1982, p. 37.

Revival, all coming “predominantly” from northern and western areas.<sup>184</sup> This is true also for the three poems among the Gawain romances that can be included in the Alliterative Revival, that is, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Awntyrs off Arthur* and *The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawain* that as we have seen come all from the north and north-west of England. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, as already said, is written in alliterative stanzas of irregular length, each followed by a rhymed “bob-and-wheel.” *The Awntyrs off Arthur* is written in “one of the most demanding and rich echoic verse forms in the English language”: rhymed thirteen-line stanzas, where the first nine verses are alliterative long lines bound by four stresses and by the end rhyme; the last four verses in each stanza form a “wheel”, where the first three lines rhyme with the same sound and the last line with the ninth rhyme.<sup>185</sup> *The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawain* is also written in thirteen-line stanzas and has the same complex metrical structure as *Awntyrs*;<sup>186</sup> these two fifteenth-century poems in particular “form a link with the Scots alliterative poems of the later part of the century” and the fact that they both come from extremely northern areas could be a proof that “alliterative poetry retreated northwards under pressure from London English and the Chaucerian tradition.”<sup>187</sup> The strong presence of a Chaucerian influence in the South of England however seems to be more in general at the basis of the “northward shift” that interested the production of romance in time.<sup>188</sup>

Another poetic form employed in the Gawain poems is that of the ballad, that is characterized by four line stanzas rhyming *xaxa*, usually intended to be read aloud.<sup>189</sup> Among the Gawain poems we find three ballads, all preserved in the Percy Folio: *The Marriage of Sir Gawain*, *The Carle of Carlisle* and *King Arthur and King Cornwall*. The ballad metre is fully

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<sup>184</sup> Pearsall, Derek, “The Alliterative Revival: Origins and Social Backgrounds”, p. 38.

<sup>185</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 172.

<sup>186</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 231.

<sup>187</sup> Pearsall, “The Alliterative Revival: Origins and Social Backgrounds”, p. 38.

<sup>188</sup> Pearsall, “The Development of Middle English Romance”, p. 12.

<sup>189</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 359.

respected in *The Marriage of Sir Gawain*, characterized also by a simplicity of plot typical of the ballad form;<sup>190</sup> as we have seen, this poem was in fact a simplified retelling of *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, as in the case of *The Carle of Carlisle* (that however is not preserved in formal ballad metre but in rhyming couplets).<sup>191</sup> Finally, *King Arthur and King Cornwall* can be ascribed to the category of the “romance ballad”, where the four-line stanzas are mixed with six-line stanzas rhyming *abcdbb*.<sup>192</sup>

As already said, the Gawain poems fall into the wider narrative category of the “Matter of Britain”, involving Arthurian characters – distinguished by the other “matters” that provided material for Middle English romances, that is, the “Matter of France”, the “Matter of Rome” and the “Matter of England”. However, even in the same group as the “Matter of Britain” poems we can operate a distinction connected with the particular way in which such matter was employed in each poem. We can thus distinguish between “dynastic”, “chivalric” and “folk” romance. Dynastic romance originated from the interest in the chronicle tradition typical of English authors of Arthurian romances,<sup>193</sup> but does not directly touch the Gawain poems here considered. The most important distinction that we can draw among the Gawain poems then is between “chivalric” and “folk” romances, according to the way in which the adventures of Gawain and the other knights are related. It must be remembered that these classifications are not proper of the time in which the texts were produced, and did not influence the authors in the composition of their poems; they are rather “a concept of our own time, not of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries”<sup>194</sup> that can help us understand better the nature and the function of these poems. The chivalric romances in particular are characterized by a “concern with the prowess and fortunes of individual knights, [...]. As Auerbach long

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<sup>190</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 359.

<sup>191</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 374.

<sup>192</sup> Gillian, Speed and Griffith, p. 219.

<sup>193</sup> Hodder, Karen, David Burnley, Lesley Johnson, Carole Weinberg, “Dynastic Romance”, in W.J.R. Barron, ed., *The Arthur of the English, the Arthurian Legend in Medieval English Life and Literature*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001, p. 70.

<sup>194</sup> Mills, Williams, Alexander, Allen and Barron, p. 116.



ago made plain, the primary object of such an individual hero is the pursuit of ‘adventure’.”<sup>195</sup> They can be considered then as the closest ones to the traditional concept of “romance”, and indeed they include the earlier romances, those that are closer to the French poems. An important element in these romances is represented by romantic love, but it is by no means essential to the development of the story; the most important elements are indeed the adventures that follow one another in the tale, and that are often loosely linked with each other.<sup>196</sup> According to the definition provided by Maldwyn Mills then the Gawain poems that we can put in the group of the “chivalric romances” are *Ywain and Gawain*, *Libeaus Desconus*, *The Awntyrs off Arthur*, *The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawain*, *The Jeaste of Sir Gawain* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

The “folk romances” differ from the chivalric ones “not by any absolute difference of components but by a shift in the balance between them”,<sup>197</sup> that is, they are dominated by folk-tale motifs that are always the same in the various poems ( namely “tests, vows, quest, hostile challengers with a beheading game”)<sup>198</sup> rather than by the individual adventures of the hero; it is true however that many of these folk-tale motifs are shared also by the chivalric romances (this aspect however will be treated in more detail in the next section of this chapter, dedicated to the thematic structure of the Gawain poems). In this group we can include *The Greene Knight*, *The Turke and Gawain*, *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle* and *The Carle of Carlisle*, *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* and *The Marriage of Sir Gawain*, *The Avowyng of Arthur* and *King Arthur and King Cornwall*. It must be remembered that six of these poems appear in the Percy Folio manuscript and, as has already been said, they represent the more “popular” and less sophisticated poems in the whole of the

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<sup>195</sup> Mills, Williams, Alexander, Allen and Barron, p. 113.

<sup>196</sup> Mills, Williams, Alexander, Allen and Barron, p. 113.

<sup>197</sup> Gillian, Speed, Griffith and Withrington, p. 197.

<sup>198</sup> Gillian, Speed, Griffith and Withrington, p. 197

Gawain romances –<sup>199</sup> that is, those that are more likely to be close to folk tales and popular motifs.

To conclude this discussion of the “genre” to which the Gawain poems can be ascribed, we can say that the poems share all the common characteristics that are traditionally attributed to this genre; the internal variety that characterizes the poems is typical of the genre itself, to the point that some scholars have questioned the possibility of talking of “Middle English romance” at all. The question whether the poems object of this study must be labelled Gawain “romances” or Gawain “poems” relies then upon our acceptance of the idea of “Middle English romance” in general, an idea which the common features shared by these poems seem to validate. In the next section we will see how the presence of common structural elements in the plot of the poems represents a further element of unity to the group of the “Gawain romances”.

## **2.4 Recurrent Themes and Motifs**

We have seen from the previous section that one of the main points of the discussion on the nature of romance, and one that plays an important part in its definition, is the structure of the romance itself. As scholars like Auerbach and Finlayson pointed out, the essential plot of romance is made up of a series of adventures that involve a knight (that is, a member of the nobility) and that give him the opportunity to test - generally successfully - his physical, and sometimes moral, skills. The adventures that the knight has to face can be of various nature, and most of the times are unexpected events from which the action stems: “The main plot of a typical romance [...] consists of adventures, the essence of which is not always physical

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<sup>199</sup> Gillian, Speed, Griffith and Withrington, pp. 198-9.

“action” [...] so much as the occurrence of unexpected and hazardous events.”<sup>200</sup> This structure ultimately derives from Chrétien de Troyes’s romances,<sup>201</sup> and the Gawain romances on the whole are not an exception, since their basic aim is to tell us how Gawain or other characters such as his son face a series of adventures and successfully conclude them; however, the Gawain romances show, in addition, a strong cohesion in the choice of the adventures that their protagonist has to face, building their plots around recurrent themes that are repeated through the romances in the same form or in variants of the same motif. The same themes are not to be found in all romances, but we can outline groups of tales joined by the presence of a single theme; a single romance then could share one or more themes with another one. From a structural perspective, we can say that what we have been calling “recurrent themes and motifs” are elements of the structure of these romances, that are repeated adding structural unity to the group of tales that we have labelled “Gawain romances”: as Clinton Machann – who talks of these structural elements from a Proppian perspective - has pointed out, “the stories told in the fourteen romances have general structural similarities and several of them are very much alike.”<sup>202</sup> Moreover, we will see also how the repetition of these structural elements attached to the figure of Gawain in the romances of which he is the protagonist becomes endowed with social and cultural factors typical of the time and place in which they were produced.

The recurrent themes – and their variants - that we repeatedly meet in the plots of the Gawain romances, and that contribute to make them a coherent group of tales, are basically the following: the “Beheading Game” (or “Challenge”), the “Loathly Lady”, the “Temptation”, and the “Imperious Host”. To these themes, we can add the “Fair Unknown”, that does not involve directly the figure of Gawain, but that of his son in *Libeaus Desconus*. In this tale we find another popular motif, that of the “Fier Baiser”, where the hero frees from

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<sup>200</sup> Schmidt and Jacobs, p. 3.

<sup>201</sup> Schmidt and Jacobs, p. 3.

<sup>202</sup> Machann, Clinton, “A Structural Study of the English Gawain Romances”, *Neophilologus*, 66 (1982), p. 629.

a spell a beautiful woman that has been transformed into something ugly, in this case a serpent; the story has also Celtic analogues where the girl – a princess - becomes the hero's bride.<sup>203</sup> Moreover, two of the romances cannot really be included in this discussion, being openly drawn from French texts: as already said, *Ywain and Gawain*, is in fact explicitly based on Chrétien de Troyes' *Yvain*, while *The Jeaste of Sir Gawain* is drawn from two episodes of the First Continuation of Chrétien's *Perceval*. We have already met with these motifs in the previous sections, however I will provide here a short description of these themes to help the understanding of the significance of their presence in the Gawain romances.

The "Beheading Game", or "Challenge", involves the challenge posed by a mysterious visitor, who asks for a blow in the neck that will be given in return to the knight who accepted the challenge after some time. This motif was Celtic in origin, then passed into French through channels which are not entirely clear, and then went from French romance to Middle English literature; it is the episode with which the Irish epic saga *Bricriu's Feast* ends (the first recorded version of this story that we have).<sup>204</sup> A variant of this motif is the "Transformation by Decapitation", in which a rival is transformed into a fellow knight by means of decapitation. The "Loathly Lady" theme involves the transformation of an ugly and old woman into a beautiful lady thanks to the hero's acceptance of her sovereignty over him; this motif can be found also in texts other than the Arthurian stories, such as Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale* (where however we find a reference to King Arthur), but also Gower's *Tale of Florent*, and like the Challenge derives from Celtic folklore.<sup>205</sup> The "Temptation" motif is a folk-tale motif<sup>206</sup> in which the hero is tested by a supernatural host; in the case of Gawain, it becomes a way of testing his moral integrity, that is, his "fidelity" and his "loyalty to the

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<sup>203</sup> Newstead, p. 69.

<sup>204</sup> Lyman-Kittredge, George, *A Study of Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gloucester: Robert Smith, 1960, pp. 9-10.

<sup>205</sup> Gillian, Speed, Griffith and Withrington, p. 208.

<sup>206</sup> Lyman-Kittredge, p. 76.

chivalric ideal of 'truth'."<sup>207</sup> The Temptation operated by a woman was probably particularly appealing to authors of romance who chose Gawain as their main hero, given the reputation of "lady's man" that French romance had attached to him. The "Imperious Host" theme consists in the visit of an important character, such as a king, to the land of a rival often endowed with supernatural attributes; this story was attached in the Middle Ages to both Arthur and Charlemagne and has Celtic analogues.<sup>208</sup> A final motif is that of the "Vows" made by the various characters to accomplish a certain deed that will give proof of their chivalric valour, a theme "that may have been suggested by the knightly custom recorded in such poems as *Les voeux du paon*."<sup>209</sup>

Starting from these simple patterns, it is possible to group the Gawain romances that contain one of the recurrent themes: the Beheading Game appears in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and *The Greene Knight*; its variant of the Transformation by Decapitation appears in *The Turke and Sir Gawain*, *Sir Gawain and The Carle of Carlisle* and its ballad version, *The Carle of Carlisle* (even if the beheading is not directly included in the narration of *Sir Gawain and The Carle of Carlisle*, it must have been present in the original form of the story, and its absence from one of the tales may be due to "the loss of a folio from the scribe's manuscript").<sup>210</sup> Moreover, in *King Arthur and King Cornwall*, the enemy is finally decapitated by Arthur. Another variant of the Beheading Game, where an unknown knight appears at Arthur's court and asks for a challenge (but without asking explicitly for a beheading game) can be found in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, *The Marriage of Sir Gawain* and *The Awntyrs off Arthur*. The Loathly Lady motif appears in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* and in its ballad version, *The Marriage of Sir Gawain*. The Imperious Host theme can be found in *The Turke and Sir Gawain King Arthur*

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<sup>207</sup> Lyman-Kittredge, p. 76.

<sup>208</sup> Newstead, p. 68.

<sup>209</sup> Newstead, p. 61.

<sup>210</sup> Newstead, p. 60.

*and King Cornwall*, and possibly in *Gologras and Gawain*, *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle* and *The Carle of Carlisle*. The motif of the Vows can be found in *The Avowing of Arthur* and in *King Arthur and King Cornwall*. Finally, the Temptation appears in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Greene Knight*, *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle* and *The Carle of Carlisle* (see table at page 104). These motifs belong generally to the world of folk tales, and have been later included into romance, a product of chivalric culture that was originally intended for a courtly audience in ways which are not always clear; for example, according to Kittredge, *The Turke and Gawain* can be considered “an Irish folk-tale which made its way into English *via* Celtic Scotland and became attached to the Arthurian saga, more especially to the saga of Gawain”,<sup>211</sup> taking the form of a romance. In the previous section we have drawn a distinction between the more “chivalric” romances and those – like *The Turke and Gawain* - which are more on the “folk” side, but it is also true that a chivalric romance like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* features elements that are shared with the folk romances, such as the Beheading Game that we find also in *The Turke and Gawain*. It is not incorrect then to propose an analysis of these themes inspired to the Proppian theory, a theory based on the work of the Russian scholar Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928), that has in folk-tales and in the elements or “functions” that give form to them its main object of study. From this point of view, Machann has shown how in many of the tales Gawain is involved in a “contract-test-judgement sequence with an enchanted or magical figure”<sup>212</sup> which corresponds to Propp’s “sought-for person”,<sup>213</sup> that is, the person at the centre of the hero’s quest; in the end, this person is brought within the sphere of Arthur’s court, or a kind of “equilibrium” is built with him or her;<sup>214</sup> we can think for example of Ragnelle’s transformation, the revealing of Morgain’s trick in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, or

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<sup>211</sup> Lyman-Kittredge, p. 280.

<sup>212</sup> Machann, p. 630.

<sup>213</sup> Machann, p. 630.

<sup>214</sup> Machann, p. 631.

Gologras's acceptance of Arthur's sovereignty. The function of Gawain in these tales then is that of "an agent of Arthur and his court"<sup>215</sup> who has to "penetrate" the world of a mysterious enemy, a potential threat to the unity of Arthur's court, and to mediate between these two worlds: "finally, he acts as a mediator between the two orders",<sup>216</sup> who restores the equilibrium – that had been menaced by an intrusion of an "otherworld" - between them. For Machann, the nature of the contraposition between these two opposite worlds, that only Gawain seems to have the power to reconcile, is the contradiction "between the realm of civilization, Christian and courtly rules of conduct, and the realm of pagan magic and the ritual of nature cults."<sup>217</sup> A character such as the Green Knight then, who has often been connected with the world of wilderness and mysterious, ancestral forces, could be taken as the perfect representative of this mysterious realm; it is paradoxical however that the hero of the civilized world should be a character who has in turn strong pagan associations. It could be that reminiscences of these associations enabled Gawain to become this "transitional" figure between the two worlds, that of chivalry and romance, and that of Celtic lore and folk tales; his numerous appearances in all kinds of medieval literature enabled him to play such a role. Moreover, as noted by Phillip Boardman, "Gawain's role in the romances was always intimately tied to a structure of contrast or juxtaposition. Through all the romances in the early Arthurian tradition, Gawain filled a structural role as foil or standard against which other knights could be measured."<sup>218</sup> The "duplicity" intrinsic in Gawain's character then would be reflected also in romances other than the "Gawain romances", for example Chrétien de Troyes's works, where as we have seen in the first chapter the role of Gawain is exactly that of "touching stone" for the other knights, such as the protagonist of the romance.

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<sup>215</sup> Machann, p. 634.

<sup>216</sup> Machann, p. 634.

<sup>217</sup> Machann, p. 635.

<sup>218</sup> Boardman, Phillip, C., "Middle English Arthurian Romance: the Repetition and Reputation of Gawain", in Thompson, Raymond Henry and Keith Busby, eds., *Gawain: a Casebook*, New York and London: Routledge, 2006, p. 257.

	Beheading Game	Transformation by Decapitation	Challenge	Temptation	Loathly Lady	Imperious Host	Vows
<i>Sir Gawain and the Green Knight</i>	●		○	●	○		
<i>The Greene Knight</i>	●		○	●	○		
<i>The Turke and Sir Gawain</i>		●	○			●	
<i>Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle</i>		●		●		●	
<i>The Carle of Carlisle</i>		●		●		●	
<i>The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle</i>			●		●		
<i>The Marriage of Sir Gawain</i>			●		●		
<i>The Avowyng of Arthur</i>							●
<i>The Awntyrs off Arthur</i>			●				
<i>King Arthur and King Cornwall</i>	○					●	●
<i>The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawain</i>						●	

Scheme of the recurrent themes and motifs in the Gawain romances. To these we must add the “Fair Unknown” and the “Fier Baiser” themes in *Libeaus Desconus*. The empty circles indicate that the motif only appears in the poem without being central.



The “role” of Sir Gawain in the romances dedicated to him has been discussed by Thomas Hahn, for whom Gawain he is the “good son”, in contrast with Mordred, the treacherous and illegitimate son, and the “chief mediator of the father’s law, the young man who offers the ultimate reassurance about the status quo.”<sup>219</sup> He is an “exemplary Young Man” who dedicates himself to adventures that bring him to face the “marvellous or unknown”, elements that he makes “manageable for the rest of society.”<sup>220</sup> His courtesy is an instrument to achieve control over the irrational forces that threaten the unity of society, represented by the alien figures – the Carle, the Turke, Ragnelle – that he has to face in the various romances. For Hahn, Gawain – as we know him in these romances - is not a character as we could think of him in a modern “novelistic” perspective; he simply plays a *role*,<sup>221</sup> that of an instrument of the “reconciliation or reappropriation, rather than the destruction, of the strange or alien”.<sup>222</sup> His being deprived of a concrete characterization – in terms of external appearance or inner nature – and his pivotal role in the romances then make of him almost a “narrative function”,<sup>223</sup> to say it again in Proppian terms, a structural element that enables the narrative to develop following a certain path – often one that has already been told in numberless other tales, and that only needs variation or changes in the names of the characters to suit a certain audience. The “function” accomplished by Gawain in the romances could be then at the basis of his success with medieval English audiences: “casting him as hero signalled to audiences the reassurance that all would be well, since no harm could possibly come to the chief knight of the Round Table.”<sup>224</sup> When hearing the name of Gawain, audiences would be immediately reassured about the success of the hero, and the final resolution of the conflict hidden in the story would probably appeal to a hidden need of these

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<sup>219</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 24.

<sup>220</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 24.

<sup>221</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 24.

<sup>222</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 24.

<sup>223</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 24.

<sup>224</sup> Gillian, Speed, Griffith and Withrington, p. 198.

audiences, a need for a sense of newly-found equilibrium between forces that they felt as potentially threatening, if not correctly reconciled by means of Gawain's courtesy and reputation.

Lee Ramsey has attached a social meaning to the nature of this hidden contrast between Gawain and an alien figure in the Gawain romances: "The significance of the tests varies considerably, but it is usually obvious. These are stories that express specific, though various, social doctrines or ideas."<sup>225</sup> He assumes that the mysterious "other" is often represented as a "churl", a man belonging to an inferior social class, like the Carle or Sir Gromer Somer Joure, the challenger in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*; this aspect, that was clearly stated in the earliest version of the testing games to which Gawain is subject in the romances, has however been removed from most of the romances, so that the enemies of Gawain are knights such as Galeron of Galloway in *The Awntyrs off Arthur* or the lord of a castle as in *The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawain*.<sup>226</sup> In the romances then, and in the motifs employed by them, there is a strong stress on some kind of "equality" – or equilibrium – between these two opposite forces, the nobility and the "churl". For example in the Beheading game, a return blow is to be given, and Ramsey draws a parallel between this situation and the relationship within nobility and commoners in the Middle Ages, where peasants supply with food their lords, who in return protect them from external threats.<sup>227</sup> Moreover, Gawain is often humiliated by his host, as it happens with the Carle, or has to diminish – even if only apparently – his valour to bring peace between Arthur and his enemy, as it happens with Gologras: Gawain pretends to have been defeated by him, and only at this condition will Gologras accept Arthur's authority. The problem of sovereignty seems to be indeed an important one in these tales, and comes out also in the Loathly Lady motif, that

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<sup>225</sup> Ramsey, Lee C., *Chivalric Romances, Popular Literature in Medieval England*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983, p. 200.

<sup>226</sup> Ramsey, p. 205.

<sup>227</sup> Ramsey, p. 206.

shows how “women, a subject class like the commoners, still desire sovereignty above all else.”<sup>228</sup> Another possible interpretation of the presence of these motifs in the Gawain romances then could be that of a social need that was felt by the audience of this kind of literary product – an audience in which mercantile classes were playing a growing role as centuries progressed - <sup>229</sup> and that found a solution in the representation of a clash between two social classes, the nobility and the common people, mediated by a popular character, that of Gawain. This more social view on the nature of the elements that make up the structure of the Gawain romances however is not necessarily in contrast with those that have been given so far, since it could be that in the centuries during which these romances were produced, different meanings – connected to different social needs felt by their audiences – were attached to them, often overlapping and creating new and unexpected significations.

Before concluding this section, it must be pointed out also that the Gawain romances are further held together by elements that are not strictly “structural” but that contribute to the building of frequent scenes and ambiances into which the motifs displayed above could be easily set. Common elements are thus encounters in the forest, or in the battlefield, and even in the bedroom (for example an important moment in the narrative, that of reconciliation, happens in the bedroom in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*);<sup>230</sup> other common features are wild animals (as in *The Avowying of Arthur* and *The Carle of Carlisle*), magical events (as the appearance of Guinevere’s mother in *The Awntyrs off Arthur*, the Green Knight’s “reappropriation” of the head in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the many transformations that involve characters such as the Turke and Dame Ragnelle). Moreover, the frequent presence of places like Carlisle, Inglewood Forest and the Tarn Wadling help creating a familiar ambiance for the audience.<sup>231</sup> As in the case of the recurrent

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<sup>228</sup> Ramsey, p. 207.

<sup>229</sup> Ramsey, p. 209.

<sup>230</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 26.

<sup>231</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 26.

themes and motifs, these elements add further cohesion to the Gawain romances, helping the reader – or listener – recognize familiar patterns between two or more romances; what we have in the end then is a composite picture, a patchy mix of elements that appear and disappear from one romance to another, but that at the end leaves the impression of a consistent representation – at least, one rich in meanings in harmony with each other.

In conclusion then, we may try to answer the question with which I started this chapter, that is, whether we can talk of a group of “Gawain romances” or not. In my opinion the answer is positive, because notwithstanding the differences in terms of chronology, geography, poetic form and sometimes genre between the romances, they show nevertheless a strong structural cohesion that is given by the repeated presence of common themes and motifs together with other elements such as common events, scenes or places. The figure of Gawain seems thus to be slightly reduced in importance from such an analysis, being considered as no more than one among the main “narrative functions” and narrative elements that made up the plots of the Gawain romances: as pointed out by Hahn, “the unity that the poems attain is consequently often more the outcome of structural repetition and thematic variation than of character or event.”<sup>232</sup> And yet, understanding the “structural” role of Gawain in these romances helps us in the comprehension of the real importance of his presence; his nature of mediator, that accompanies him through the sometimes intricate routes of medieval narrative, makes him a necessary element in the complex weave resulting from the continuous crossing of the motifs connected with him, as if he was a sun around which planets were revolving, sometimes interlacing their orbits, sometimes not. Even if we cannot consider him a “character” in the sense that is more familiar to us, the strength and appeal of this figure then is not lost, and can still intrigue the modern reader in search for hidden meanings in narrative materials which may sometimes seem incompatible with a modern

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<sup>232</sup> Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, p. 26.

sensibility. In the next chapter in particular I will try to go more in depth into the anthropological aspects of the character of Gawain in the Gawain romances, starting from different elements such as his relationship with women or his proverbial courtesy, to finally try and shed more light upon the meanings which this complex and rich figure brings within him, and maybe on the reason why at least some of the “recurrent themes and motifs” that we saw in this chapter were attached to him.



## Chapter 3

### An Anthropological Approach to the Gawain Romances

#### 3.1 The Anthropological Approach to Gawain

The aim of the previous chapter has been that of establishing from a critical point of view the elements that make of the Middle English poems dedicated to Gawain a consistent group, starting from aspects such as chronology, geography, literary genre and thematic structure. In the last section in particular, I have tried to establish the actual role that Gawain plays in the definition of “Gawain poems”: is his presence sufficient to single out this group of poems from the whole of Middle English poetry or do we have to rely on something else? Trying to answer this question from a structural perspective in the last section of the chapter, I have seen how it is exactly the repetition of precise motifs surrounding Gawain (motifs that appear also in literary works other than those coming from medieval England) that enables us to identify the Gawain poems as a group, but at the risk of reducing Gawain to a mere “narrative function”, just one element among many others, nothing more than a stock character that brought with him a cluster of established significances, with which the audiences of these romances – who expected something from his presence in the text - were already acquainted, and who were even reassured by his presence in the story. Moreover, such a perspective does not give us the possibility of understanding *why* such motives were attached to Gawain; it just acknowledges that they are there.

What could then add something more to these conclusions is to be found in an anthropological approach to these texts, where what will be considered in the first place is the relationship of these poems with aspects of Welsh and Irish literature deriving from Celtic lore, and in particular with the stories involving the Irish hero Cuchulainn, with which Gawain has been associated since 1891 by Sir John Rhys in his *Studies in the Arthurian*

*Legend*.<sup>1</sup> This anthropological approach to the figure of Gawain has been expanded through the ages until our time, as we will see in detail in this section; however, it has received also some criticism, so the aim of this chapter will be also that of establishing the significance of such an approach to the study of the Gawain poems.

Among the scholars who dedicated their studies to the anthropological understanding of Gawain's figure we find Jessie Weston, who dedicated to Gawain an entire work, *The Legend of Sir Gawain*. In this study she acknowledges how the figure of Gawain has fallen into neglect, losing his original appeal and renown in the works dedicated to him, unlike other knights of the Round Table: "The most perplexing, and in many ways the most important, of all the knights surrounding King Arthur, Gawain, has hitherto failed to meet with the favour accorded to his companions."<sup>2</sup> In particular she thought that the various stories connected to him had not been sufficiently "examined and compared" in order to reconstruct the original Gawain legend.<sup>3</sup> She believed that the figure of Gawain had particularly suffered from the later developments of the "legend" connected to him, and so the purpose of her study was exactly that of restoring Gawain's original status and to determine the significance of the Gawain legend. She also tried to find the reasons behind the process of epic degeneration suffered by Gawain's character, and found them in the incompatibility of the "strongly moralizing tendencies in the later romances" with certain aspects of the Gawain legend.<sup>4</sup> What is particularly relevant about her book for the purpose of the present study is her statement that it is possible to "single out from among the various versions of Gawain's adventures certain features which, by their frequent recurrence in the romances devoted to him, and their analogy to ancient Celtic tradition, seem as if they might with probability be

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<sup>1</sup> See Matthews, John, *Sir Gawain, Knight of the Goddess*, Rochester: Inner Traditions, 2003, p. 29.

<sup>2</sup> Weston, Jessie L., *The Legend of Sir Gawain, Studies Upon its Original Scope and Significance*, London: David Nutt, 1897, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Weston, p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Weston, p. 10.



regarded as forming part of his original story”;<sup>5</sup> that is, she acknowledges the existence of an original “Gawain legend”, the aspects of which are to be found in the texts dedicated to him. She takes as an example the well-known “waxing and waning” of Gawain’s strength related to the course of the sun, a feature that appears frequently in Arthurian literature, for example in Gautier de Douzens’s *Conte del Graal*, in the prose *Merlin*, and in Malory, and that could be a hint about Gawain’s primitive identification with a solar god.<sup>6</sup> She then goes in depth into the various aspects of the legend of Gawain, as we shall see more specifically in the next sections.

Another scholar who contributed to carry forward the anthropological approach to the figure of Sir Gawain was Roger Sherman Loomis. In his article “Gawain, Gwri and Cuchulinn”, and in other works such as *Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance*, he gives a detailed account of the relationships existing between the figures of Gawain and Cuchulinn, and in particular he establishes the figure of Gwri as intermediate between them, basing his deduction on linguistic and textual evidence. He starts his explanation of this relationship by stating that “that Gawain is a counterpart of Cuchulinn is one of the commonplaces of Arthurian scholarship”<sup>7</sup>, and even that “there was an organic connection between the respective heroes, some reason why Gawain should regularly take the place of Cuchulinn.”<sup>8</sup> Loomis shows also how the Welsh counterpart of Gawain, Gwalchmei, that we find in the *Trioedd Ynys Prydein* (“Triads of the Island of Britain”)<sup>9</sup> is probably the Welsh version of the French hero Gauvain more than the contrary (that is, this figure was not originally Welsh) since Gwalchmei “plays no part in Welsh tales uncontaminated by Continental romances”.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, he states that the figure connecting Cuchulinn to Gawain then would be Gwri (or

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<sup>5</sup> Weston, p. 12.

<sup>6</sup> Weston, pp. 12-13.

<sup>7</sup> Loomis, Roger Sherman, “Gawain, Gwri and Cuchulinn”, *PMLA*, 43 (1928), p. 384.

<sup>8</sup> Loomis, “Gawain, Gwri and Cuchulinn”, p. 385.

<sup>9</sup> Matthews, p. 27.

<sup>10</sup> Loomis, “Gawain, Gwri and Cuchulinn”, p. 385.

“Gwair”),<sup>11</sup> a character who appears in various texts, included the *Mabinogion*, and whose name can be recognized in that of Gawain’s brothers, Gaheris and Gareth.<sup>12</sup> The argument developed by Loomis to account for this correspondence is quite complex, and has been summarized by Matthews thus:

1. Gwair, a rather mysterious figure whose name appears several times in the *Mabinogion* and elsewhere, is the son of the Welsh hero Llŵch Llleinawc.
2. Cuchulainn is the son (or possibly the reincarnation) of the Irish god Lugh Loínbheimionach.
3. Gwalchmai is the son of Llew ap Cynfarch (Lot or Loth in the later romances).
4. Numerous incidents from Gawain’s career coincide with those in the life of Cuchulainn, and also with those of Gwair under the names of Gwri and Goreu.
5. The name of Gawain’s son in the romances, Guinglainn, sounds like an attempt to Anglicize the name Cuchulainn.
6. Two names which appear in the warrior list in *Culhwch and Olwen* Gwri Gwallt-Avwyn and Gwri Gwallt-Euryn, transpose easily into the names of Galvagin and Galvarium, as found on the Modena archivolte.
7. The epithets attached to the name Gwri both mean Golden Haired.
8. Cuchulainn had a halo of golden hair.
9. Both Cuchulainn and Gwri are precocious at birth and are put out to fosterage.
10. Both are connected with the birth of a foal which is to provide them with a steed in later life.<sup>13</sup>

As we shall see later in more detail, Loomis also draws a parallel between the Celtic figure of Curoi and that of Sir Bertilak on the basis of their roles in the Beheading Game (respectively in relation to Cuchulainn and Gawain), even affirming that originally this figure and that of Cuchulainn represented two reincarnations of the same figure, the Celtic god Lug: “There is very clear evidence that Curoi and Cuchulinn share with Lug the same dual nature of sun-god and storm-god, as would be natural for rebirths of Lug”, characteristics that have been inherited also by Gawain.<sup>14</sup> The consequences of such a statement will be seen more in detail in the course of this chapter.

More recently, the anthropological approach to the figure of Sir Gawain has been further extended by John Matthews, who has collected the results of his studies about this subject in *Sir Gawain, Knight of the Goddess*. Here, he follows the path established by Jessie Weston and carries forward the analysis she began, insisting in particular on Gawain’s original identification with the knight of the “Goddess”, that is, an element of Celtic religious

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<sup>11</sup> Loomis, “Gawain, Gwri and Cuchulinn”, p. 389.

<sup>12</sup> Loomis, “Gawain, Gwri and Cuchulinn”, p. 338.

<sup>13</sup> Matthews, pp. 29-30.

<sup>14</sup> Loomis, “Gawain, Gwri and Cuchulinn”, p. 391.

beliefs rather difficult to define, and that Matthews describes as “what we could call an abstract principle, represented in the form of a woman.”<sup>15</sup> One of the main identifications of the concept of “Goddess” is with sovereignty, a concept that for the Celts was strongly linked with the land itself and that, as Matthews notes, has a “particular relationship” with Gawain.<sup>16</sup> For Matthews then the reason behind the epic degeneration affecting Gawain’s character is exactly his connection with “the Goddess”: “Gawain, as the champion of the Goddess, underwent a form of character erosion similar to that of the Goddess herself”,<sup>17</sup> due to his strong pagan associations. He then tries to build a kind of biography of the character of Gawain through the medieval texts in which he appears, relating each stage of his “rise and downfall” to aspects of Celtic lore, and in particular to the cult of the Goddess cited above. He sees the origin of the stories concerning Gawain in that blurry area where “the shadowy forms of earlier traditions mingle with those of the new”,<sup>18</sup> that is, in the contradictory mix of pagan and Christian beliefs that merged in the works of medieval authors. Finally, Matthews makes specific reference to the work of Jessie Weston, affirming that “although it has been customary to criticize Miss Weston for her flights of fancy” in many observation she was right,<sup>19</sup> thus establishing a link with her early works but at the same time claiming an increased awareness about the issues examined.

The anthropological approach has also been criticized by scholars such as C.S. Lewis, who in a collaborative study of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* maintained that even if it is true that literary texts give a contribution to the anthropological studies, it is not sure that “anthropological study can make in return any valuable contribution to literary criticism”.<sup>20</sup> He takes as an example the statement that Gawain’s growing strength is a remnant of his

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<sup>15</sup> Matthews, p. 20.

<sup>16</sup> Matthews, p. 20.

<sup>17</sup> Matthews, p. 22.

<sup>18</sup> Matthews, p. 21.

<sup>19</sup> Matthews, p. 23.

<sup>20</sup> Lewis, Clive Staples, “The Anthropological Approach”, in Donald R. Howard and Christian Zacher, eds., *Critical Studies of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968, p. 59.

primitive identification with a sun-god; for Lewis, this statement is at least superfluous, since “the anthropological explanation may be true and it may have an interest of its own; but it cannot increase our understanding or enjoyment of one single sentence in the *Morte*”,<sup>21</sup> one of the texts in which this detail appears - which makes us understand that his approach is an esthetic one. He also criticised Loomis’s studies, devoted to the anthropological understanding of Arthurian narrative, remarking how his contribution – “however legitimate in its own field” - could not be helpful in any way to “literary criticism”.<sup>22</sup> For Lewis then, it is not true that anthropology can really add something to the understanding of a literary text, since it makes reference to things that are not in the knowledge of the reader, but on the contrary, it is the literary text experienced by the reader that can make him know something about the anthropological truth that lies behind it, and that otherwise he could only know through the anthropologist’s explanations. To say it in Lewis’s terms, “the savage origins are the puzzle; the surviving work of art is the only clue by which we can hope to penetrate the inwardness of the origins.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, Lewis thinks that this kind of approach puts the literary texts on the background, giving more importance to the understanding of “ancient rituals” than to the texts themselves, and wishes to bring again on the foreground the literary text itself.

In my opinion, the anthropological approach is just one of the many ways in which we can approach a text, not the only one nor the best one. If flanked by other perspectives on the text or texts that are being studied, it can explain other aspects of these texts which could not be contemplated by the other approaches and help with the comprehension of their multiple significances. For example, as I noted before, the structural approach adopted in the previous chapters tells us only about the fact that certain recurrent themes were attached to Gawain in the various romances dedicated to him, without explaining why (the reason why indeed is not

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<sup>21</sup> Lewis, p. 60.

<sup>22</sup> Lewis, p. 60.

<sup>23</sup> Lewis, p. 64.

of interest for the purpose of that study). The anthropological approach on the contrary may help us understand why such particular motives were attached to Gawain, if they are related or not to his origins in the Celtic myth and so on, giving us a different perspective on the texts themselves and helping us shed some light upon the genesis of the character of Gawain and the “legend” surrounding him. In the following sections then I will analyze some of the aspects of the Gawain legend that can be found in the Gawain romances, relating them in general with the aspects of Celtic lore that may be lying behind them, and in particular with the character of Cuchulainn and the concept of “Goddess”.

### **3.2 Sir Gawain and the *Grene Gome***

As I noted in the previous section, at the basis of the anthropological theories that have been formulated to explain certain recurrent features of Gawain appearing in medieval texts dedicated to him, there is the idea that Gawain inherited through obscure roads characteristics that were originally attached to heroes and gods of Irish mythology; moreover, many of the adventures in which he featured were originally part of the cycles dedicated to these figures, which are basically three: Cuchulainn, Curoi and Lug. Before I give an anthropological analysis of the figure of Gawain as he appears in the Gawain romances, I will then briefly describe these three fundamental figures and the theories proposed by various scholars to explain their connections with Gawain; moreover, I will give an explanation of the concept of “Goddess” that is also important to understand the links of Gawain with Celtic tradition.

Cuchulainn is a famous Irish hero, who appears especially in the Ulster Cycle, a group of Irish mythological tales about the Irish province of Ulster; Cuchulainn was considered the best of Ulster’s heroes.<sup>24</sup> In this cycle, we find the story of how “he was born magically when

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<sup>24</sup> Monaghan, Patricia, *The Encyclopedia of Celtic Mythology and Folklore*, New York: Facts on File, 2004, p. 462.

his mother, Dechtire, drank water with a worm in it.”<sup>25</sup> Soon after his birth, he was named Setanta, and received many gifts from the heroes of Ireland: “the poetry of Amairgin, the eloquence of Sencha, the wealth of Bláí Briuga.”<sup>26</sup> In other versions, he is the son of Deichtire and Lug, a god; all the sources agree on the fact that he showed his abilities in combat from an early age.<sup>27</sup> The name “Cuchulainn” was given him at the age of seven, when he killed the hound of the smith Culann in order to enter his house where a big party was being held; at the smith’s reproach, the young boy promised that he would serve as a guard dog for him until he found a replacement: “thus the boy earned his adult name, for Cú means ‘hound’, and the hero was the ‘hound of Culann.’”<sup>28</sup>

Another protagonist of Irish mythology whose presence can be detected in the Gawain romances is that of Curoi, who “appears to have been originally a deity transformed into a hero, for he lived in a rotating otherworld castle whose entrance disappeared after sunset”; he was probably the protagonist of a now lost epic cycle similar to that of Cuchulainn.<sup>29</sup> This figure is rather mysterious, and has been variously identified with a deity of Munster or with the “sacred king who brings good fortune with an honest reign”.<sup>30</sup> He had many adventures in the Otherworld, sometimes together with Cuchulainn; in a famous episode, they travelled together to the Otherworld where they stole away many of its treasures, including “the magical woman Blathnat, three otherworldly cows, and a cauldron of abundance.”<sup>31</sup> They agreed to divide the spoils fairly, but then Cuchulainn withdrew from the deal; Curoi took his revenge by burying him in the ground and leaving outside only his head, which he then

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<sup>25</sup> Monaghan, p. 108.

<sup>26</sup> Monaghan, p. 109.

<sup>27</sup> Monaghan, p. 109.

<sup>28</sup> Monaghan, p. 109.

<sup>29</sup> Monaghan, pp. 110-111.

<sup>30</sup> Monaghan, p. 111.

<sup>31</sup> Monaghan, p. 110.

shaved and covered with dung.<sup>32</sup> The two heroes appear together also in other episodes, as we shall see later.

Lug is an Irish god and one of the great heroes of Irish mythology;<sup>33</sup> he is generally considered a solar deity for the brightness emanating from his face, and some believe that his name is connected with the Latin word for light, “lux”.<sup>34</sup> The heritage of Lug “runs through Irish mythology”: he was Cuchulainn’s father, whom he had from a human woman, Deichtire; however, Lug’s reputation waned with the power of the Celts in Ireland and his figure was progressively forgotten.<sup>35</sup> In his article “Gawain, Gwri and Cuchulinn”, after a complex analysis of all the characteristics of these figures, Loomis comes to the conclusion that Curoi, Cuchulainn and Lug share “the same dual nature of sun-god and storm-god” and considers Curoi and Cuchulainn, though often opposed figure in the Celtic myths, to be both reincarnations of Lug.<sup>36</sup> To demonstrate the link with Gawain, Loomis quotes a description of Gawain that appears in the *Vulgate Merlin* (an episode of the Vulgate Cycle), where Gawain’s sword (Excalibur, given him by Arthur earlier in the story) is described as producing the noise of thunder (“car elle bruit si comme tounoires”):<sup>37</sup> Loomis concludes that “not only, therefore, do Curoi, Cuchulinn, and Lug possess the combined powers of sun and storm, but also, the descendant of Cuchulinn, Gawain.”<sup>38</sup> We can then consider these figures as “mythical ancestors” of Gawain; their presence lies under the surface of the texts and sometimes reveals itself through details of great or small importance.

Finally, as we saw in the previous chapter, the concept of “Goddess” is strongly connected in Irish mythology with that of sovereignty; the “goddess of the land” in Celtic Ireland was “envisioned as bride of the king”; she was sometimes represented as a hag asking

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<sup>32</sup> Monaghan, p. 111.

<sup>33</sup> Monaghan, p. 296.

<sup>34</sup> Monaghan p. 297.

<sup>35</sup> Monaghan p. 297.

<sup>36</sup> Loomis, “Gawain, Gwri and Cuchulinn”, pp. 190-191.

<sup>37</sup> Sommer, H. Oscar, *The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances*, vol. 2, Washington: The Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1908, p. 367, in Loomis, “Gawain, Gwri and Cuchulinn”, p. 391.

<sup>38</sup> Loomis, Roger Sherman, “Gawain in the Squire’s Tale”, *Modern Language Notes*, 52 (1937), p. 391.

for a kiss, and sometimes as Eriu, the “titular goddess” of Ireland, or also as Medb, a fierce woman who marries one king after the other.<sup>39</sup> However, even “if the figures vary, the concept they embody remains stable: that the king’s duty is to maintain the land’s fertility through righteous behavior.”<sup>40</sup> This concept of “Goddess of sovereignty” can be seen clearly in an Irish story that clearly recalls the story of the Loathly Lady, and that features the hero Niall:

Niall and his four brothers went hunting one day, only to find themselves in a region without game and growing very thirsty. The only water they could find was in a well guarded by a hag so unsavory in appearance that the young men fell back in disgust when she demanded a kiss of them. Only Niall stepped forward to bestow a kiss, and other favors, upon the hag - who, pleased with his performance, revealed herself to be a beautiful young woman in disguise. She told Niall that her name was Flaith or Sovereignty and bestowed upon him the kingship of the land.<sup>41</sup>

Moreover, as we will see in the course of the chapter, the different representations of the Goddess as both an old hag and a young bride, are echoed in many of the stories concerning Gawain even if the sense of their original unity had been lost: “thus the original, perhaps unnamed Goddess, as is the way with all such deities, became fragmented into several disparate personalities”.<sup>42</sup>

One of the biggest clues that tells us of the association of Gawain with these figures of Celtic origin is the famous episode of the “Beheading Game”, that features in many of the Gawain romances, sometimes in the form of a variant, the “Transformation by Decapitation”, as we have already seen in the previous chapter. As is universally known, the Beheading Game is at the basis of the most famous of the Gawain romances, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; the derivation of the episode at the centre of the tale from Irish folklore has been widely recognized and analyzed, namely by Kittredge in his *A Study of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Kittredge demonstrated that the theme of the Beheading Game “which occurs

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<sup>39</sup> Monaghan, p. 424.

<sup>40</sup> Monaghan, p. 424.

<sup>41</sup> Monaghan, pp. 357-358.

<sup>42</sup> Matthews, p. 54.



in Arthurian romances, French, English and German, from about 1180 to about 1380”<sup>43</sup> derived from the Irish story of *The Champion’s Bargain*, the concluding adventure of the epic saga called *Bricriu’s Feast* (originally called *Fled Bricrend*), that is contained in a manuscript known as *Lebor na hUidre* (or *Book of the Dun Cow*), written around 1106, though the entire saga is much older in origin.<sup>44</sup> The story can be summarized thus: Curoi appears at the court of Ulster, disguised as a herdsman,

to create dissent among Cúchulainn and two other heroes, Conall Cernach and Loegure Buadach. Urging them each to cut off his head, in return for which he would cut off theirs, Cú Roí was twice decapitated and twice rejoined head to body, but both Conall and Lóegure refused to fulfill the entire bargain. Only Cuchulainn offered his own neck after the third decapitation and miraculous recapitation, and so Cú Roí announced him as the chief of all heroes.<sup>45</sup>

The similarities with the story told in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are striking, and have been summarized thus by Kittredge:

In both the Irish saga and the English poem we have a huge uncanny stranger visiting the court of a great national king on a high feastday and challenging the assembled company to an exchange of blows with an axe. In both, the stranger declares that he has come to test the valor of the court on account of its high reputation for bravery and other noble qualities. In both, the consternation of the warriors is dwelt on. In both, the stranger taunts the heroes when they hesitate, declaring that their fame is undeserved. In both, the king does not subject himself to the test: in the Irish he is expressly exempted by the challenger; in the English he resigns the adventure to Gawain. In both, one knight only is found who dares fulfill the compact, and he is the most distinguished of all. In both, the stranger spares this knight, proclaiming him the best of heroes.<sup>46</sup>

Other important elements that must be pointed out to understand the strong ties between this poem and the underlying Irish tradition is the fact that the name of Gawain’s host - whom we know at the end to be one and the same with the Green Knight - Bertilak, is clearly derived from the Irish *bachlach*, meaning herdsman,<sup>47</sup> exactly the form in which Curoi disguises himself when he proposes his challenge (a term that has been translated also with “carl” by Kittredge), and the fact that Curoi appears with a grey mantle; the Irish word for grey is in fact *glas*, which can also mean green, and the possibility of confusion between the two words has been taken as a possible explanation for the knight’s strange colour in *Sir Gawain and the*

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<sup>43</sup> Buchanan, Alice, “The Irish Framework of Gawain and the Green Knight”, *PMLA*, 47 (1932), p. 315.

<sup>44</sup> Lyman-Kittredge, George, *A Study of Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gloucester: Robert Smith, 1960, p. 10.

<sup>45</sup> Monaghan, pp. 110-111.

<sup>46</sup> Lyman-Kittredge, p. 15.

<sup>47</sup> Buchanan, p. 316.

*Green Knight*.<sup>48</sup> Gawain would be then the equivalent of Cuchulainn, and Sir Bertilak the equivalent of Curoi. Moreover, there exists also another version of the Beheading Game, less known, called by Kittredge the “Uath version”, because the name of the tester is Uath (an Irish word meaning “terror”) that has also similarities with the story told in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* – and as we will see with other texts of the Gawain-cycle - which he thinks to be more ancient than the Champion’s Bargain version (the best known), and which is also shorter.<sup>49</sup> One of the details in this account of the Beheading Game that the two texts have in common are the setting of the “return blow” in a wild region, where the hero is accompanied by a guide (on the contrary, in the longer version the beheading happens in the royal court and there is no need for a guide); moreover, in the shorter version the challenger makes three attempts to cut Cuchulainn’s head, and finally, the hero is hosted by a friendly person in both tales on his way for the wild region where the beheading has to take place.<sup>50</sup> Buchanan, who has attentively analysed and compared the two versions, notes also the similarities in the description of the two hosts: in the “Uath version”, the host is called the Yellow son of Fair – probably a reminiscence of a solar god – while in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* Lord Bertilak is described as having a “broad” and “red” beard, and a face “as fierce as fire.”<sup>51</sup> Coherently with the double identity of god of sun and storm, Bertilak has also features typical of a thunder god, that appear when the whetting of his axe is described.<sup>52</sup> The basic pattern behind the story of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* would be then that of a visit to a “solar host, who directs the hero on to a trial of his valor by a personification of the storm.”<sup>53</sup>

In addition to these two versions of the Beheading Game, Loomis adds another story involving Cuchulainn and Curoi that bears resemblances with adventures concerning Gawain,

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<sup>48</sup> Loomis, Roger Sherman, “The Visit to the Perilous Castle: A Study of the Arthurian Modifications of an Irish Theme”, *PMLA*, 48 (1933), p. 1030.

<sup>49</sup> Lyman-Kittredge, p. 17.

<sup>50</sup> Buchanan, pp. 317-324.

<sup>51</sup> Buchanan, p. 324.

<sup>52</sup> Buchanan, p. 325.

<sup>53</sup> Buchanan, p. 325.

that is, the story of the “Visit to Curoi’s Fortress” that is also featured in the saga of *Bricriu’s Feast*.<sup>54</sup> In this version, Curoi has once again to decide which one among the Irish heroes will obtain the sovereignty of Ireland; Cuchulainn, Loegaire and Conall go to his fortress in order to be tested. When the three heroes arrive, they only find Curoi’s wife, Blathnat (whom he had abducted from the Otherworld), who has been alerted by her husband of their coming and treats them properly; she also tells them that they have to watch the fortress (who is enchanted and revolves every night) by night until Curoi returns home. The first two heroes are attacked by night by giants and are overcome; only Cuchulainn, who is attacked by “three troops of nine foes and by a huge monster”<sup>55</sup> succeeds in slaying his enemies, including the giant who is probably Curoi in disguise. At Curoi’s return he is accorded the sovereignty of Ireland.<sup>56</sup> Loomis suggests also that in the original version of the story there was probably an amorous intercourse between Blathnat (whose name means “Little Flower”) and Cuchulainn, since in other stories they are lovers and together plot Curoi’s death.<sup>57</sup> What is interesting to note is that this last version bears strong resemblances not only with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* – where the host’s lady too acts in connivance with her husband – but also with another of the Gawain romances, *The Carle of Carlisle*. In this tale there are striking similarities with the “Visit to Curoi’s Fortress”: in the *Carle* we have in fact once again three heroes – Gawain, Baldwin and Kay – who arrive at the fortress of the Carle, where they are variously tested, but only Gawain succeeds in the end thanks to his courtesy; moreover, there is an intercourse between Gawain and the Carle’s wife, requested by the Carle himself<sup>58</sup> – a feature that as we will see later we find also in another Gawain romance, *The Greene Knight*.

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<sup>54</sup> Loomis, “The Visit to the Perilous Castle”, p. 1004.

<sup>55</sup> Loomis, “The Visit to the Perilous Castle”, p. 1005.

<sup>56</sup> Loomis, “The Visit to the Perilous Castle”, p. 1005.

<sup>57</sup> Loomis, “The Visit to the Perilous Castle”, p. 1006.

<sup>58</sup> Loomis, “The Visit to the Perilous Castle”, p. 1008.

At a deeper level, the story of the young champion fighting with an “otherworldly challenger” who undergoes a “mock-death” and often accompanied by a mysterious female figure,<sup>59</sup> hides a well-attested tradition coming from a prehistoric age, that of the “annual kingship, traces of which are to be found both in Mediterranean traditions as well as those of the British Isles and Ireland,”<sup>60</sup> where kings were elected for one year only, after which they were ritually slain by a challenger “who was not permitted to fail.”<sup>61</sup> This would be the logic hidden in the tales where a challenge between Cuchulainn and Curoi takes place, and that as we have seen bears strong resemblances with many narratives concerning Gawain, including the Gawain romances. In this perspective then, the “Young Hero” (Cuchulainn or Gawain) represents Spring, while the “Old Champion” (Curoi, but also the Carle, Sir Bertilak – Green Knight, and so on) represent Winter, or the Old Champion that has to be defeated; the aim of the challenge is to ensure that the Goddess “has a virile and vigorous champion at all times.”<sup>62</sup> The Beheading Game then represented in origin a cycle of death and rebirth, a mutual exchange of life that ensures immortality. As noted by Lena Petrovič in reference to Gawain’s adventure in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, “In so far as the poem is about the rebirth of life in nature, Gawain's mock-beheading is the death of the solar god and his reincarnation into his opponent, whom he then replaces in the Goddess's affections, just as winter merges into and is replaced by spring.”<sup>63</sup> This primitive, almost organic concept was then conveyed through time from one generation to the next, progressively losing its original significance and becoming attached to different characters, until it was intercepted by Gawain’s orbit and became part of the “Legend” concerning him. Later on, the texts featuring Gawain as a protagonist, deriving from those ancient tales of death and rebirth, maintained some of the original significances of those tales, but in a way not always simple to detect. Moreover, what

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<sup>59</sup> Matthews, p. 78.

<sup>60</sup> Matthews, p. 76.

<sup>61</sup> Matthews, p. 76.

<sup>62</sup> Matthews, pp. 76-77.

<sup>63</sup> Petrovič, Lena, “Gawain: Transformations of an Archetype”, *Linguistics and Literature*, 2 (2000), pp. 146-147.

comes out from this analysis is the fact that Sir Gawain and the various “grene gomes” – “green gome” is the definition with which the Green Knight appears in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* – are in fact different faces of the same coin, representing Spring and Winter, which though at the opposite poles of the yearly natural cycle are in fact inseparable from each other, forever replacing one the other in the unstoppable flow of time. In a process that interested also the various representations of the Goddess, what had been originally one and the same character – the god of sun and storm, of spring and winter – lost his perceived unity through time and was transformed into two separate characters, bearing opposite – but complementary – features: Cuchulainn and Curoi, Gawain and the Green Knight, which could be replaced by the Carle, the Turke, Gologras, Sir Somer Gromer Jour, and King Cornwall – that is, Gawain’s antagonists in the Gawain romances. The enemies that Gawain has to face in the romances then could be considered as alter-egos, or his otherworldly counterparts. This is why in Gawain, but also for example in Sir Bertilak, we can find both the characteristics of a solar deity and of a storm god. It is useful to read Lena Petrovič’s description of the relationship between Gawain and Bertilak in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in order to understand this concept better:

There are indeed numerous indications in the poem that Gawain and the Green Knight can be seen as interchangeable characters. Thus, for example, the manner in which his array is described suggests that Gawain, too, is a symbol of resurgent natural life: on his silk neck-band there is embroidered a profusion of birds and flowers - turtle-doves and parrots, periwinkles and true-love knots - reminiscent of the birds and flies embossed and embroidered on the Green Knight's vesture. If the predominant colour of his dress is red and gold, as distinguished from the glittering green of his opponent, it is to hint that in Gawain, also, there is a touch of the sun. The sparkles that flew up from flinty stones under the hooves of his horse, too, associates him further with the fire and thunder of the sun-gods.<sup>64</sup>

But let’s now see more in depth this “doubling” of Gawain in other Gawain romances.

In *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*, we find this description of the “carle” (ll. 247-270):

The Carle the knyghttus can beholde,  
Wytt a stout vesage and a bolde.  
He semyd a dredfull man:  
Wytt chekus longe and vesage brade;  
Cambur nose and all ful made;  
Betwyne his browus a large spane;

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<sup>64</sup>Petrovič, p. 37.

Hys moghth moche, his berd graye;  
Over his brest his lockus lay  
As brod as anny fane;  
Betwen his schuldors, whos ryght can rede,  
He was two tayllors yardus a brede.  
Syr Key merveld gretly than.

Nine taylloris yerdus he was hyghtht  
And therto leggus longe and wyghtht,  
Or ellus wondor hit wer.  
Ther was no post in that hall,  
Grettyst growand of hem all,  
But his theys wer thycker.  
His armus wer gret, wyttoutyn lese,  
His fyngeris also, iwys,  
As anny lege that we ber.  
Whos stoud a stroke of his honde,  
He was not wecke, I undurstond,  
That dar I safly swer.<sup>65</sup>

This is clearly the description not simply of a “churl”, but of a being of inhuman shape and dimensions, in other words, a giant, just as we find in the “Visit to Curoi’s Fortress”, where the three heroes have to fight one after the other with a terrible giant – who is Curoi himself disguised. Moreover, as noted also by Loomis, the detail of the Carle’s grey beard could be taken as a reminiscence of the grey colour of Curoi’s mantle.<sup>66</sup> If we compare this description of the Carle with that of the ballad version of the same tale, however, we will see that an important detail is added: in addition to the “gray beard” that is reported also here, we find a description of his eyes: “With two great eyen brening as fyer/ Lord, hee was a lodlye syer”<sup>67</sup> (ll. 181-182). This detail of the eyes burning as fire could be a trace of the Carle’s original connection with the sun-god figure, similarly to Bertilak’s red beard.

In *The Turke and Gawain* we do not find a similar description; however, the connections of this figure with the Otherworld are by no means clear: in his company, Gawain has to face a series of incredible adventures, including playing tennis with giants; moreover, in the first test that he has to face we find a meaningful event (ll. 66-73):

He led Sir Gawaine to a hill soe plaine.

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<sup>65</sup> *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*, in Hahn, Thomas, ed., *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995, p. 92 (all quotes from the poem are from this edition).

<sup>66</sup> Loomis, “The Visit to the Perilous Castle”, p. 1030.

<sup>67</sup> *The Carle of Carlisle*, in Hahn, Thomas, ed., *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995, p. 379 (all quotes from the poem are from this edition).

The earth opened and closed againe -  
Then Gawaine was adread.  
The merke was comen, and the light is gone:  
Thundering, lightning, snow, and raine,  
Therof enough they had.

Then spake Sir Gawaine and sighed sore:  
"Such wether saw I never afore  
In noe stead there I have beene stood."

The earth that opens and closes seems almost a passage to the Otherworld, and then the first test set for Gawain manifests itself in the form of a terrible storm, as if the god of storm himself had come to fight against Gawain-Cuchulainn, representing Spring and the sun.

A similarly otherworldly nature is shared also by King Cornwall, who in *King Arthur and King Cornwall* boasts to have had a daughter from Guinevere, which Arthur was not able to do. I think that this accusation is particularly significant, and is not simply intended to portray Arthur as a poor cuckold who has to take revenge on his rival to restore his disrupted dignity, but could hint at a more threatening aspect, the infertility of a king, which in ancient times could represent a true disgrace; in this respect it is significant that it is exactly Guinevere to gush over King Cornwall's beautiful Round Table – more beautiful than that of Arthur - as if she was accusing her husband of not measuring up with his rival. Moreover, the fact that Cornwall is surrounded by magical beings and objects, like a wonderful steed whose eyes "glisten as doth the gleed"<sup>68</sup> (l. 114) is also a hint to his otherworldly connections.

Finally, other scattered hints at the underlying traditions connecting Gawain to ancient myths can be detected in *The Awntyrs off Arthur*, where Gawain's horse, Grissel, is decapitated by Gawain's opponent, which causes Gawain an immense pain, almost as if he had been mortally wounded himself (ll. 541-550):

He stroke of the stede hede streite there he stode.  
The faire fole fondred and fel, bi the Rode.  
Gawayn gloppeden in hert;  
He was swithely smert.  
Oute of sterops he stert  
Fro Grissell the goode.

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<sup>68</sup> *King Arthur and King Cornwall*, in Hahn, Thomas, ed., *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995, p. 425 (all quotes from the poem are taken from this edition).

"Grissell," quod Gawayn, "gon is, God wote!  
He was the burlokest blonke that ever bote brede.  
By Him that in Bedeleem was borne ever to ben our bote,  
I shall venge the today, if I con right rede."<sup>69</sup>

Finally, in *The Avowyng of Arthur*, what resembles most a supernatural being with godlike features is no less than a gigantic boar, that Arthur has to fight to stop his horrible devastations and that he only overcomes after an epic fight. We must remember that the boar was a symbolic animal for the Celts;<sup>70</sup> moreover, the way in which it is described in the poem really makes of him a being that is not of this world. Indeed, he is so dreadful and strong that Arthur starts to have "drede" of him<sup>71</sup> and comes to the point of praying God to help him kill that beast that seems almost a devil (ll. 225-232):

There downe knelus he  
And prayus till Him that was so fre:  
"Send me the victoré!  
This Satanus me sekis."  
All wroth wex that sqwyne,  
Blu, and brayd uppe his bryne;  
As kylne other kechine,  
Thus rudely he rekes.

In conclusion, in the Gawain poems we find many references to the underlying myths that were originally part of Celtic lore – and had sometimes even more ancient origins, coming from prehistoric times – and that then were transferred upon the figure of Gawain. In particular we have seen in this section how the various antagonists that Gawain has to fight in his numerous adventures, and that are often represented as "alien" figures who threaten the integrity of Arthur's court until they are defeated or in some way brought within it, can be seen at a deeper level as alter-egos of Gawain, being originally opposite faces of the same figure, that of the Champion of the Goddess. We will see in more detail in the next section how the relationship with the Goddess is reflected in the Gawain romances and maybe also in other texts other than these.

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<sup>69</sup> *The Awntyrs off Arthur*, in Hahn, Thomas, ed., *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995, p. 195 (all quotes from the poem are taken from this edition).

<sup>70</sup> Monaghan, p. 50.

<sup>71</sup> *The Avowyng of Arthur*, in Hahn, Thomas, ed., *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995, p. 123 (all quotes from the poem are taken from this edition).



### 3.3 “Lady’s Man” or “Knight of the Goddess”?

If there is one feature of the character of Gawain that is universally recognized and that can be considered as distinctive of his figure throughout the narratives of which he is the protagonist, it is surely his reputation of “lady’s man”, that goes hand in hand with his proverbial courtesy: “Gawain’s reputation can hardly be kept completely separate from his courtesy, a fact especially true with regard to his love affairs.”<sup>72</sup> His “reputation for numerous love affairs” is widely recognized in romance studies,<sup>73</sup> and can be epitomized in the famous episode of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, where Lady Bertilak doubts that the knight in front of her is really Gawain, the famous lover, who “could not be alone with her and not crave a kiss.”<sup>74</sup> French tradition makes Gawain “unencumbered by any lasting *amour*”,<sup>75</sup> and as we saw in the first chapter, Gawain’s reputation as a lover deteriorated in the later romances of the French tradition, where his amorous adventures were often treated in a burlesque manner, and where he was sometimes even depicted as an “unrepentant sinner”.<sup>76</sup> To propose a few more examples, Gawain’s success with women causes “hearts to flutter, breasts to heave”<sup>77</sup> wherever he goes; a girl called Pucelle de Lis in the First Continuation of Chrétien’s *Perceval* brings always with her an “embroidered image of him”,<sup>78</sup> while a damsel in *Hunbaut*, an early thirteenth-century French poem, has even a statue of Gawain in her bedroom.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, in one of the Gawain romances, *The Greene Knight*, which as we have seen is a shortened and simplified version of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the challenging knight – strangely

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<sup>72</sup> Whiting, Barlett Jere, “Gawain: His Reputation, His Courtesy and His Appearance in Chaucer’s Squire’s Tale”, *Medieval Studies*, 9 (1947), p. 189.

<sup>73</sup> Rushton, Cory J., “The Lady’s Man: Gawain as Lover in Middle English Literature”, in Amanda Hopkins and Cory James Rushton, eds., *The Erotic in the Literature of Medieval Britain*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2007, p. 28.

<sup>74</sup> Rushton, p. 29.

<sup>75</sup> Rushton, p. 29.

<sup>76</sup> Busby, Keith, “Gawain”, in Norris J. Lacy, ed., *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia*, New York: Garland, 1991, p. 178.

<sup>77</sup> Matthews, p. 92.

<sup>78</sup> Rushton p. 30.

<sup>79</sup> Keith Busby, “Hunbaut”, in Norris J. Lacy, ed., *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia*, New York: Garland, 1991, p. 241.

enough - tries to bring Gawain to his own castle to make his own wife happy, who is in love with Gawain! The examples are innumerable and are spread throughout Gawain's literary appearances; indeed, what characterizes the loves of Gawain is exactly the fact that he is not, like Lancelot, faithful to one single lady, but is always open to new adventures with different women – we may remember also the *Jeaste of Sir Gawain*, where he does not think twice about making love with a girl found in a *pavillon* in a forest, causing the wrath of her relatives, or the *Carle of Carlisle*, where he seems rather to enjoy the Carle's request of sleeping with his wife and must be stopped by him before he goes beyond "innocent" kisses... In Matthews's words, "Gawain is rather the courteous and disinterested champion of all maidens than the lover of one."<sup>80</sup> Gawain's reputation of lover and his numerous love affairs, however, could be something more than a simple literary characterization, and hint at a more ancient tradition lying under the surface of these texts.

For Jessie Weston, Sir Gawain had been in the original tradition concerning him the lover of the Queen of the Otherworld, that lived in a kind of Irish heaven called the *Isle of Women*, inhabited by women ruled by a queen "of unearthly beauty", who sometimes visited the real world "inviting a chosen hero to return with her to her kingdom;"<sup>81</sup> for Weston, this connection of Gawain to the Isle of Women was originally an "essential part of his story."<sup>82</sup> Weston notes that Gawain is the protagonist of a similar journey to a land dwelt only by women in a text – among others - that we saw in the first chapter, Heinrich von dem Turlin's *Diu Krône*; Weston concludes saying that "it becomes evident that Gawain's adventure was not merely a visit to the other-world, but specifically to the other-world as conceived of in Celtic mythology".<sup>83</sup> For this scholar then, the journey to the *Isle of Women*, the Celtic

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<sup>80</sup> Weston, p. 45.

<sup>81</sup> Weston, pp. 36-37.

<sup>82</sup> Weston, p. 45.

<sup>83</sup> Weston pp. 37-38.

Otherworld, was originally part of the tradition connected with Gawain;<sup>84</sup> moreover, it was exactly this connection with a pagan Otherworld that caused Gawain's epic degeneration in the later romances. She also noted that the women connected with Gawain are often accompanied by the figure of a "magician", for example Ragnelle in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, who is the sister of Sir Gromer Somer Jour, a magician, and the daughter of the Carle – who has clear Otherworld features - in *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*.<sup>85</sup>

These aspects of the "Gawain legend" were further investigated by John Matthews, in a more articulate and detailed way, with evidence taken from numerous texts both of the Celtic tradition and from various medieval Arthurian narratives. As I said in the first section of this chapter, he dedicated an entire volume to the study of the relationship hidden in various medieval texts between Gawain and the Celtic "Goddess", that as we have seen represents ultimately the sovereignty of Ireland,<sup>86</sup> analyzing in depth all the aspects of the Gawain legend that are related to this concept. I will now give a succinct summary of the theory expressed by Matthews in his book, and then add some interpretations to the poems of the Gawain cycle, to see if they can be included in such analysis and thus add credibility to the anthropological approach to the character of Gawain.

For Matthews, the key female characters to understand the underlying links between Gawain and the Goddess are Guinevere and Morgain, respectively Arthur's wife and sister. For Matthews, they are "the dark and light aspects of the Goddess, primal archetypes well-attested in myth cycles from almost every corner of the world."<sup>87</sup> Thus, they were originally two aspects of the same entity, but were later separated and transformed into opposite figures: Guinevere "was at one time recognized as representing the Flower Bride" while Morgain "as

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<sup>84</sup> Weston, p. 40.

<sup>85</sup> Weston, 51.

<sup>86</sup> Matthews, p. 20.

<sup>87</sup> Matthews, p. 88.

sorceress, shape-shifter and implacable enemy of Arthur and the Round Table Fellowship, clearly represents her 'dark' side".<sup>88</sup> Gawain acts then as a kind of "pendulum"<sup>89</sup> between these two aspects of the Goddess, whose two faces can be detected in the various feminine figures that he meets in various tales; the reason why he "never remains with one woman at any length of time"<sup>90</sup> is because he is the "rightful Champion of the Goddess (be she Morgain or Guinevere)," a title acquired by means of the Beheading test and sealed by a magic token given by the Goddess to her hero,<sup>91</sup> like the famous green girdle given by Lady Bertilak to Gawain, or the magic bridle he receives from the girl protagonist of the French text *La Mule sans frein*.<sup>92</sup>

The reason behind Gawain's inability to refuse the advances of women, more than his courtesy, would be then his "faithfulness" to the Goddess, because "he saw in each woman an earthly representative of the Goddess whom he served."<sup>93</sup> Matthews then agrees with Weston that almost all of Gawain's lovers have some otherworldly aspect about them, and can sometimes be considered as true goddesses, who test him "either physically or morally" in some way.<sup>94</sup> The test is intended to confer Gawain sovereignty, as in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, where the ugly old woman who then turns into a beautiful young lady is no less than "the ancient Goddess of the Land, sovereignty herself, who alone can gift the king with the right to rule over his land."<sup>95</sup> The Loathly Lady then, together with Morgain and Guinevere, represents another "disguise" of the powerful Goddess, whom Gawain serves as her rightful Champion.<sup>96</sup> In this view, the real meaning of the Beheading Game would be that of the strife between the old champion who challenges the new one, but is defeated and

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<sup>88</sup> Matthews, p. 88.

<sup>89</sup> Matthews, p. 88.

<sup>90</sup> Matthews, p. 88.

<sup>91</sup> Matthews, p. 91.

<sup>92</sup> Matthews, p. 88.

<sup>93</sup> Matthews, p. 92.

<sup>94</sup> Matthews, pp. 92-94.

<sup>95</sup> Matthews, p. 96.

<sup>96</sup> Matthews, p. 97.

has to retire: in the original version of the story then “the knight was challenged by the retiring champion, overcame him either by simple prowess or with the assistance of the Goddess herself, who then became his mistress and rewarded him with a gift of life or strength or riches.”<sup>97</sup> The story of the Loathly Lady - that can be found in Celtic tales such as that of the “Sons of King Daire”<sup>98</sup> but that shows also parallels in Oriental tales,<sup>99</sup> which attest for the universality of such a theme - is particularly important to understand the original role of Gawain, to whom the story was later attached, since it alludes to the fact that originally it was Gawain himself who was intended to be “the champion of Britain’s sovereignty” in the place of Arthur.<sup>100</sup> This suggestive hypothesis could offer a key to understand the attachment of English audiences with the figure of Gawain, an aspect that as we have seen in the previous chapter is still unsolved; if Matthew’s theory is true, it could be then that medieval audiences were aware of Gawain’s original role as the Champion of Britain – in the same way as Cuchulainn was the Champion of Ireland - thanks also to numerous popular stories that have not come to us, in addition to the romances where allusions to these old conception can be sometimes detected, and this is why they were so sympathetic with his figure and considered him a sort of national hero. I will now go more in depth in the analysis of these romances to find a validation of Matthews’ theories.

We have seen how the figure of the Loathly Lady is of great importance for Gawain; among the Gawain romances, this figure features both in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* and its ballad version, *The Marriage of Sir Gawain*. What I noticed by comparing these two poems, is that the later version (or at least, later in redaction) shows more archaic elements, and could be in my opinion closer to the original version of the story featuring Gawain. Let’s look for example at the characterization of the Loathly Lady, and at

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<sup>97</sup> Matthews, pp. 102-103.

<sup>98</sup> Matthews p. 97.

<sup>99</sup> Coomaraswamy, Ananda K., “On the Loathly Bride”, *Speculum*, 20 (1945), p. 393.

<sup>100</sup> Matthews, p. 105

the way in which she makes her apparition in the two texts. In *The Wedding*, it is quite clear from the description of the lady that she is not a being of this world; the description is in my opinion too exaggerated to be intended simply to convey a grotesque and comic impression.

The lady is described thus (ll. 228-245):

She was as ungoodly a creature  
As evere man sawe, withoute mesure.  
Kyng Arthure mervaylyd securly.

Her face was red, her nose snotyd withalle,  
Her mowithe wyde, her tethe yalowe overe alle,  
With bleryd eyen gretter then a balle.  
Her mowithe was nott to lak:  
Her tethe hyng overe her lyppes,  
Her chekys syde as wemens hippes.  
A lute she bare upon her bak;  
Her nek long and therto greatt;  
Her here cloteryd on an hepe;  
In the sholders she was a yard brode.  
Hangyng pappys to be an hors lode,  
And lyke a barelle she was made.  
And to rehearse the fowlnesse of that Lady,  
Ther is no tung may telle, securly;  
Of lothyngesse inowghe she had.<sup>101</sup>

The description becomes even more “estranging” when details about her mount are given: a beautiful horse, covered with gold and jewels, hinting at the lady’s noble status. Another hyperbolic description of the old woman’s ugliness – both in physical aspect and behaviour – is given later in the tale (ll. 548- 556):

She had two tethe on every syde  
As borys tuskes, I wolle nott hyde,  
Of lengthe a large handfulle.

The one tusk went up and the other doun.  
A mowthe fulle wyde and fowlle igrown,  
With grey herys many on.  
Her lyppes laye lumpryd on her chyn;  
Nek forsothe on her was none iseen -  
She was a lothly on!

The descriptions of the old lady then make almost clear that she is not a being of this world – and indeed her magical nature will be revealed when she transforms into a beautiful lady.

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<sup>101</sup> *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, in Hahn, Thomas, ed., *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995, p. 53 (all citations of the poems in this section are from this edition).

Other hints to the original legend that can be detected in the tale are the request on the part of Sir Gromer Somer Jour, Ragnelle's brother, to Arthur to come back to the same place where they met "att twelwe day monethes end" (l. 49), a detail that we find also in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; moreover, there is a hint to the possible beheading of Arthur in case he does not give him the right answer after the twelve months on the part of the Loathly Lady, who says (ll. 267-269):

Graunt me, Sir Kyng, butt one thyng,  
And for thy lyfe I make warrauntyng,  
Or elles thou shalt lose thy hed.

So even if the threat of the beheading is not directly stated in the poem, an echo of it can be found in these lines, maybe alluding to an older version of the story where the Beheading Game was featured; as noted by Matthews in fact, originally the Riddle Test and the Beheading Game were probably part of the same story and represented the initiation test set for the hero who had to become the new Champion of the Goddess.<sup>102</sup>

However, in the later ballad version of this story, more hints to the mysterious and otherworldly nature of the old lady and to the original features of the Gawain legend can be detected. First of all, it is interesting to note the prominence that is given to the figure of Guinevere at the beginning of the poem: for two times in six lines she is praised as "that bride soe bright of blee"<sup>103</sup> (l. 4 and l. 6), making of her almost a representation of the "light" side of the Goddess. This could be due to the fact that, as noted by Matthews, Guinevere could be taken as an incarnation of the "young" Goddess, and was originally the protagonist of the story of the "rape and subsequent rescue of the Flower Bride" that we find represented also in the Modena Archivolt, and where the rescuer of Guinevere is not Arthur, but Gawain.<sup>104</sup> Moreover, the knight who threatens Arthur and sends him on his quest to solve the riddle bids him to meet again "Upon the New Yeers Day" (l. 47), the same day in which the Green

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<sup>102</sup> Matthews, p. 104.

<sup>103</sup> *The Marriage of Sir Gawain*, in Hahn, Thomas, ed., *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995, p. 362 (all citations of the poem in this section are from this edition).

<sup>104</sup> Matthews, pp. 25-26.

Knight makes his appearance at Arthur's court in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* – probably a day which had some significance in an ancient and cyclic conception of the world. Finally, the appearance of the old lady in Arthur's sight is described in my opinion in a way which makes it clear that she is not a human being, but an otherworldly one, and almost a deity (ll. 53-56):

And as he rode over a more,  
Hee see a lady where shee sate  
Betwixt an oke and a greene hollen:  
She was cladd in red scarlett.

This description is repeated almost identical a few lines later, with a stress on it; the two trees between which the lady sits seems to form almost a “door”, a passage for another world. It is significant also that the trees are an oak – usually seen as a strong tree, which can live for a long time, thus an old being – and a holly, a small, green bush which appears also in the hand of the Green Knight in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: we could see in these two plants a symbolization of the two “faces” of the Goddess, the old and the young one; the Loathly Lady and Guinevere, but also the two “champions” fighting for her love, Winter and Spring. These two plants had also symbolic meanings in both the Celtic and Christian traditions: the holly was in fact connected with Christmas, and its name in Middle English was associated with the word “holy”, while for the Celts it was the emblem of the Holly king, the ruler of winter, opposed to the Oak King.<sup>105</sup> The oak was “one of the most important trees to the Celts” for its usefulness and for being connected with the Otherworld as shown by oak funeral houses.<sup>106</sup> The oak continued to be regarded as a sacred tree also in post-Celtic times, “when folklore envisioned the oak as a living being that, when cut, cried out or took revenge upon the forester, maiming or killing him as it fell”; moreover, fairy folk were thought to live in oaks,

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<sup>105</sup> Monaghan, p. 248.

<sup>106</sup> Monaghan, p. 364.



and together with the ash and the thorn, oaks were believed to mark fairy places.<sup>107</sup> It is also interesting to note that in her second apparition to Arthur, the old lady appears once again “underneath a greene holly tree” (l. 125); as noted by Matthews, the colour green was “the colour of Faery, of the Irish *Sidhe*, of the Otherworld and of the dead”.<sup>108</sup> Moreover, there is an interesting connection between the red dress of the old lady and that of the same colour that Lady Bertilak wears the first time she meets Gawain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The cross references to other texts and the particular description of the old lady’s apparition then are in my opinion hints to an older version of the story, where the role of the Loathly Lady as an Otherworld being come to test Gawain was stated clearly; moreover, the resemblance appears more clearly in the later version of the story.

Finally, it is interesting to note that traces of the Loathly Lady’s “supernatural” nature can be found also in Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, and once again in the description of her unexpected apparition in the forest. The knight protagonist of the story is riding back home, desperate because he has not found the answer to the riddle that could save his life, when suddenly twenty-four dancing fairies appear in front of him; he tries to reach them, but the otherworldly beings vanish, and in their place a lady of incredible ugliness appears (ll.989-999):

And in his wey it happed hym to ryde,  
 In al this care, under a forest syde,  
 Wher as he saugh upon a daunce go  
 Of ladyes foure and twenty, and yet mo;  
 Toward the whiche daunce he drow ful yerne,  
 In hope that som wisdom sholde he lerne.  
 But certainly, er he cam fully there,  
 Vanysshed was this daunce, he nyste where.  
 No creature saugh he that bar lyf,  
 Save on the grene he saugh sittyng a wyf –  
 A fouler wight ther may no man devise.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Monaghan, p. 364.

<sup>108</sup> Matthews, p. 87.

<sup>109</sup> Chaucer, Geoffrey, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson. Third ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987, p. 118.

It in this passage the apparition of the lady is not only clearly described as an incredible event, thanks to the presence of the fairies' dance, but also connected once again with the colour green; moreover, it is significant to note that also in this tale the knight has been put to death by decapitation, so once again we find a combination of the Beheading and the Loathly Lady themes.

Apart from the Loathly Lady, there are other women in the Gawain romances that could be considered as different aspects of the Goddess whom he served; first of all, Lady Bertilak, the lady of the castle where Gawain finds hospitality in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, who is also the wife of Lord Bertilak, the Green Knight himself; we could take her as a counterpart of Morgain - represented in the poem as an old woman, openly contrasted with the beauty of Lady Bertilak in a passage of the poem - who as we know had organized the entire beheading game to frighten Guinevere. The two "faces" of the Goddess here appear then as totally opposed. Through the story, Gawain moves from one woman to another; he is tempted, or better, tested, by Lady Bertilak, who, as pointed out by Matthews, gives him a "token" of his power, the magic green girdle which could protect him from any harm.<sup>110</sup>

This opposition appears even more clearly, even if not exactly at first glance, in the later and shortened version of this poem, *The Greene Knight*, which has been often regarded as a rather rough and inconsistent version of the tale, that the scribe had probably read or listened to before but then could not remember properly when he decided to rewrite the story.<sup>111</sup> The strange aspect of the poem is the fact that the Green Knight, Sir Bredbeddle, is expressly sent by his wife's mother, who is a sorcerer and has taught him to magically change his shape, to bring Gawain into his house, where Bredbeddle's wife fervently waits for him. As Gillian Rogers notes, this detail transforms the Green Knight into nothing more than a

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<sup>110</sup> Matthews, p. 88.

<sup>111</sup> Rogers, Gillian, "The Grene Knight", in Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson, eds., *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997, p. 366.

“procurer for his own wife, apparently in full knowledge of what he is doing.”<sup>112</sup> The story seems then quite absurd, and definitely far from the refinement of its inspiratory poem. However, we could look at the poem from another perspective, which could explain why the redactor of the poem made such a strange narrative choice. If we consider that a similar plot is shared also by another of the Gawain romances, *The Carle of Carlisle*, and that the story underlying Gawain’s adventure is basically that of the challenge with the “old champion” – in this case, Sir Bredbeddle – to conquer the Championship of the Goddess – here represented in her two faces by the old sorcerer and the young daughter, who in addition is in love with her future Champion, Gawain – we will see that the story looks less absurd and possibly closer to the original plot as outlined by Matthews. Sir Bredbeddle has come to challenge Gawain, in order not to lose the favour of the Goddess whom he has faithfully served so far, and tests him following the bidding of the Goddess herself - but this time in her “old” shape. The final and logical conclusion would be the marriage of Gawain with Bredbeddle’s wife after he has been slain by the hero; however, in the end the story follows the path of the best known version, where the courtesy of Gawain is tested and he prefers to be faithful to his host and does not surrender to the lady’s advances in order to keep his moral values. In the end, he even brings Bredbeddle to King Arthur’s court with him. In my opinion then, what seems strange behaviour on the part of Bredbeddle, probably due to the author’s limited narrative skills, could be the result of the influence of other versions of the story that the redactor knew, and that influenced his rendition of the more famous poem.

Finally, we have to consider one of the Gawain romances that is not entirely dedicated to Gawain, but rather to his son, the “Fair Unknown” Guinglain, that is, *Libeaus Desconus*. In this romance we find a version of “the rape and subsequent rescue of the Flower Bride”, another incarnation of the “otherworldly queen or Goddess with whom Gawain is seen to be

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<sup>112</sup> Rogers, p. 369.

constantly connected.”<sup>113</sup> Moreover in this tale – as in other tales dedicated to the “Fair Unknown”, who being his son, brother or him in person has almost always some kind of connection with Gawain -<sup>114</sup> the young lady is transformed into an ugly being, in this case a horrible serpent, and by kissing her on her request the hero delivers her from the enchantment, marries her and becomes king. This detail echoes the last part of the Loathly Lady story, and is then connected with the question of sovereignty conferred by the Goddess.

To sum up, we have seen from this analysis that in many of the Gawain romances we can find various traces of the mythical figure of the “Goddess” representing sovereignty, echoed by the numerous female figures that surround Gawain. These traces appear within the romances in the form of two opposite archetypal figures, the Loathly Lady, which we can identify as Morgain, sometimes represented also as an old sorceress, and the Flower Bride, the young girl that must be rescued and married, as was originally the case of Guinevere or the beautiful wife of Gawain’s host, as in *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight* and in *The Carle of Carlisle* (where we find another beautiful women, the Carle’s daughter, who is given as a prize to Gawain for his courtesy), and their reiterated presence in various texts reinforces the hypothesis of the original role of Gawain as “Knight of the Goddess”, more than simply “Lady’s man”, which is one of the main points at the basis of the anthropological view of this knight. I can say then that the anthropological approach to Gawain finds a strong support in the poems of the Gawain cycle, as I will explain better in the last section of the chapter, which will be dedicated to a final evaluation of this approach.

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<sup>113</sup> Matthews, p. 26.

<sup>114</sup> Matthews, p. 57.

### 3.4 A Final Evaluation

In conclusion, I can say that at least some of the Gawain romances, and especially those that appear to be the more “popular” versions of the tales, like the later ballads, contain details that can be interpreted according to the theories advanced by scholars of the anthropological approach, or discrepancies that can be partly resolved when these theories are referred to. Moreover, this seems to confirm the theory advanced by Bruce, that “in Arthurian romance, as in other forms of literature, older traditions about any given character often survive by the side of those of later origin”.<sup>115</sup> The Gawain romances may then be taken as an example of texts that give validity to the anthropological approach, or at least that can be better understood with such an approach. The hypothesis of a connection of Gawain with a mythical “Goddess” or of his almost “organic” relationship with the Irish characters of Cuchulainn and Curoi – even without calling into cause the existence of an original “Gawain legend” now lost and surviving in the written texts dedicated to him - may in fact give a possible explanation for the connection of recurrent themes and motifs like the Beheading Game with Gawain or his characterization of a “lady’s man” and not, for example, Lancelot or Perceval.

Finally, if we consider once again the lines dedicated to Gawain in the *Squire’s Tale*, we will see that there are two elements that are strongly highlighted and that form the “classical” characterization of Gawain, that is, his proverbial courtesy, and a quite vague reference of his staying in the world of “Fairye”,<sup>116</sup> the land of the fairies. This reference to Gawain’s living in the Otherworld probably suggests only that he was commonly associated with wonderful events, told in the numerous tales of which he was the protagonist, and indeed

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<sup>115</sup> Bruce, James Douglas, *The Evolution of Arthurian Romance from the Beginnings Down to the Year 1300*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1923, p. 153, in Loomis, Roger Sherman, “The Visit to the Perilous Castle: A Study of the Arthurian Modifications of an Irish Theme”, *PMLA*, 48 (1933), p. 1001.

<sup>116</sup> Chaucer, Geoffrey, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson. Third ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987, p. 170, l. 96.

Gawain's "early associations with magic and the supernatural were perpetuated throughout English literary tradition."<sup>117</sup> Moreover, Gawain's connection with otherworldly beings and happenings is well attested not only in almost all the romances that form the Gawain-cycle and in other texts of the English tradition, but also in numerous Arthurian texts coming from all Europe, as we saw in the first chapter. We may take this association with the Otherworld simply as a common feature of Arthurian literature, where indeed one may be expecting the presence of incredible events and characters. However, as suggested in this last chapter, at a deeper level this association may be a hint to an underlying tradition where the Otherworld was something more than a place where fairies were thought to live, and that had connections with a much earlier tradition that found in Gawain the ideal inheritor of ancient myths and beliefs. We may then consider Gawain as a character "on the threshold", a figure that belongs to two different and opposite traditions, the Celtic, pre-Christian world (the "Otherworld", or the world of "Feirye") and the world of "olde curteisye", the medieval Arthurian tradition that inherited from it many characters and stories and transformed them into matter of chivalric tales. As pointed out by Machann in reference to this double nature of the character of Gawain in the romances of the Gawain cycle, "at the same time that he is following the rules of courtesy, he is performing an act of ritual magic which concerns cycles of death and rebirth. [...] At any rate, Gawain is the link between the two realms. [...] Incorporation of the Gawain hero-figure into the Arthurian romances is a method of reconciling two traditions or at least providing for their confluence."<sup>118</sup> This is probably why, as we saw in the second chapter, in the Gawain romances this character is almost always invested with a "reconciliatory" function with an alien world, something that exists outside Arthur's court - sometimes its evil double as in the case of Morgain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, sometimes a figure threatening its unity or its legitimacy, protesting for having had his lands taken by Arthur or coming to

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<sup>117</sup> Dalrymple, Roger, "Sir Gawain in Middle English Romance", in Helen Fulton, ed., *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012, p. 275.

<sup>118</sup> Machann, Clinton, "A Structural Study of the English Gawain Romances, *Neophilologus*, 66 (1982), p. 635.

test the moral qualities of its members. Moreover, an echo of this “reconciliatory” function of Gawain can be seen also in texts outside the Gawain romances, for example it may not be by chance that in Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur* it is Gawain who defeats the Saracen Priamus, who then becomes an ally of King Arthur and helps him defeat the Roman emperor, or that in Chrétien’s *Perceval* it is Gawain who finds a way of communicating with Perceval who has fallen in a state of trance, bringing him back again in the world of “reason”. The proverbial courtesy glorified by Chaucer’s allusion may then be a more acceptable and understandable way for medieval authors and audiences to label this “reconciliatory” function, which, as I tried to demonstrate, may be due exactly to his belonging to two different and contrasting traditions. This hypothesis is also in accordance with the fact that, as we saw in the second chapter, the Gawain romances often come from territories of England at the border with territories where the Celtic influence remained strong, namely Wales and Scotland. It is thus true that “the medieval English Gawain is a complex figure whose many facets reflect the range of influences and traditions that make up the Arthurian legend”;<sup>119</sup> however the complexity of this figure may be due to something more than a mere confluence of traditions, and offer a fascinating example of coexistence and reconciliation of distant and even opposite worlds into a fictional character, to whom only is given the possibility to cross the line that separates them.

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<sup>119</sup> Dalrymple, p. 276.





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