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# *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: Not Really a Chivalric Romance*

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*Medieval English romance Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is unique not only in its form, content and structure, but also in the poet's skillful use of conventions that play with the reader's expectations by introducing elements that make the poem exquisitely ambivalent and place it in the fuzzy area where reality and fiction overlap. Although the poem seemingly praises the strength and purity of chivalry and knighthood, it actually subtly criticizes and comments on their failure when practiced outside the court and in real life. This is particularly noticeable when the poem's symbolism, its hero, and the society he comes from are read against historical context, i.e. as reflections of the realities of medieval life. Accordingly, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight can be read as a poem that praises chivalry and knighthood more by way of commenting on their dissipation than through overt affirmation, as the future of the kingdom, its rulers and society, with its faulty Christian knights, is far from bright, given the cracks and flaws that mar its seemingly glossy façade.*

Keywords: English literature / medieval romance / *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* / love / knighthood / chivalry

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is one of the best medieval English romances and also one of the most unconventional. The collection of poems is considered a unique phenomenon, given that it was written by a singular author in English before the fifteenth century; its rich illustrations make it one of the earliest illustrated literary English manuscripts (Spearing 37). The poet's exquisite skills are praised in terms of

the poem's "elaborate, symmetrical structure" and "balance, contrast, and antithesis," as noticed by Howard, whereas Kinney borrowed the poet's term "play" to emphasize the wonderful nature of this intricate, aesthetically pleasing text, as the poet tends to play with the readers' expectations by introducing some scenes or motifs "only to ironize or undercut them" (Howard 44; Kinney 457, 464).

The poem's specificities inspire the reader to seek new interpretations, but also to question the conventional features of the genre, which may lead to new conclusions that, in turn, question the existing interpretations and bring about new ones. For example, the period when the Gawain poet lived has been dubbed the "alliterative revival" as a number of alliterative poems of that period appear to have been modelled upon the Anglo-Saxon alliterative line. However, some authors, like Fox, have questioned the "revival" part and called it an exaggeration as this metric feature did not disappear for a period, but it only "took on new strength" after 1350, "like the English language itself" (2). Among the most notable features are the poet's language and style—he has a lot in common with his contemporaries, but there are more traits that single the poem out as uniquely different. On the one hand, as Brewer noted, the Gawain poet, like Langland, used the alliterative verse, was deeply devout and had a sense of humor, but courtly love was not the focus of his interest; on the other hand, he was courtly like Chaucer, but not as ironic or interested in secular comic tales, which is why it is believed that he wrote for an audience different from that of his two contemporaries (Brewer 5–6; Fox 4–5).

Literature reveals a lot about the time it was written in but one needs to be careful not to see it as a reliable reflection of reality, and in this sense the Arthurian tradition is no exception. Yet, its popularity and numerous adaptations have given rise to a number of prejudices and misconceptions about chivalry and knighthood. Medieval romances, and French ones in particular, including those by Chrétien de Troyes, significantly contributed to the incomprehensibility of historical facts and ideas about aristocracy, chivalry and their mutual relations which are, so to say, mostly based on mist, as King Arthur never existed, or his existence has not been confirmed yet, so the entire corpus of stories and legends that often seep into various versions of history is based on imagination. As Helen Fulton remarked, Arthur is a simulacrum, a copy with no original as there are only textual Arthurs, "reformatted copies of earlier ideas of Arthur, referring always to each other but never to an originary Arthur" (1). Arthur functions not just as a necessary heroic constituent of the plot, but also as a junction of cultural, historical and

hierarchical expectations, which are connected to the authority figure that serves crucial roles in both the actual and imaginary dimensions.

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is no exception, as it tells a story about such copies with no originals, relying on textual predecessors such as Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae*, as evident from the conventional beginning that relates the origins of Britain with Brutus and also from numerous other similarities, such as the arming of Sir Gawain that resembles the arming of Arthur, including the shield with the image of Mary. Like Geoffrey's text, which also relied on another textual predecessor, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* cannot be used as a historically reliable source, and yet, to borrow Thorpe's words about Geoffrey's work, the "material is unacceptable as history; and yet history keeps peeping through the fiction" (19). For example, the detailed description of Sir Gawain's preparation is a realistic presentation of the medieval knight, as the "primary function of chivalric knighthood was to proclaim an élite, and the most effective manner of doing so was through the visual image" (Coss 99). At the same time, the description and accompanying illustrations show that the poet was versed in armor, its parts and its use, which is why the poem is an important source for the study of late fourteenth-century armor (Lacy 172–173). The similarities, however, go beyond the surface.

The poetic representation is somewhat divided between images of reality and the attachment to the past. On the one hand, at the time when the poem was written England was facing numerous challenges, such as the war with France, depopulation caused by the plague, the Peasants' Rebellion, and the dissolution of feudalism, which all coincided with the idea that the Church should be reformed and, most importantly—and this is what keeps "peeping" through the fiction of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*—with aspirations for freedom of thought and a reconsideration of traditional values and authorities. The images and descriptions of contemporary court life and chivalry, as remarked by Bennet, may not necessarily reflect personal experience, and although the events occur in the time of Edward III, the poem is "more evocative of the court of Richard II than of his grandfather" (85). On the other hand, the poet's language, style and rhetorical devices show clear attachment to the past. If familiar with historical context, while comparing what had been with what was, the reader may notice what had changed, particularly in terms of the dissipation of certain important ideals and values, in spite of their apparent strength, purity and magnificence.

The values that were questioned include the idea of chivalry, aristocracy and their relations, mutual ones, as well as relations with reli-

gion. As noticed by Rider, most romances center around an aristocratic society that is not faithfully replicated therein “but it is nonetheless linked in recognizable ways to their interests, longings, ambitions, concerns, and values” so that it was easier to the medieval audience, and contemporary alike, to identify with it. Furthermore, romances commonly begin with the encounter between a society and the other world, whereas the nature and consequences of such encounters depend on the state of the aristocratic society described—most commonly, it is portrayed “in a state of peace and plentitude,” and the plot involves a celebration that is interrupted by an intrusion from another world (Rider 115–116). In this sense, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a typical romance with a conventional beginning; however, the events that unfold and the symbolism embedded in them reveal rather unexpected flaws and cracks in King Arthur’s reputation and the façade of his seemingly perfect, rich and beautiful court.

To begin with, the conventional introduction, invoking the legendary history of Britain as depicted in Geoffrey’s *Historia* relates the court with Troy, the magnificent kingdom “brittened and brent to brondez and askez” (2)<sup>1</sup>, <sup>2</sup> and thus, immediately, the poet foreshadows Camelot’s dismal and inevitable destiny to fall one day. The arrival of the Green Knight is another grim token. He is a manifestation of otherness and, at the same time, he is the twisted double—the literalization of the aristocratic society’s flaws and fears, the image of what it despises, although, under the glossy surface, it is not very different from what the Green Knight represents. Accordingly, Rider adequately saw this poem as an example of the otherworldly intervention that disrupts the seemingly peaceful and stable world, and as such, serves as the trigger that exposes the “pre-existing problems or tensions within the central aristocratic society which it cannot resolve on its own, or in order to bring to light faults in that society which might otherwise go unnoticed and uncorrected” (118).

The society, the court and knighthood as depicted in the poem are far from the ideals commonly praised in medieval romances, but they are also considerably different from those found in popular culture and contemporary adaptations, which, not uncommonly, stem from mis-

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<sup>1</sup> The numbers in brackets following the quotes from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* refer to the number of the line(s) of the poem in the edition: Tolkien, J. R. R. and E. V. Gordon, eds. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967.

<sup>2</sup> “fell in flame to firebrands and ashes” (17). The numbers in brackets following the translation of the quotes refer to the number of page(s) of the poem in the edition: Tolkien, J. R. R. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. London: Harper Collins, 2006.

conceptions about medieval knighthood and chivalry rooted in their literary representations. Namely, Ser Gawain is not flawless because he is representative of the equally flawed society led by a king that is far from the idealized representations of the heroic and chivalric Arthur, the legendary role model for all Christian knights and symbol of a united Britain.

In Wace's and Geoffrey's portrayal, Arthur is a tough and stout man with numerous virtues, whereas the Gawain poet ridiculed him for "joly of his joyfnes" that is "sumquat childgered" (86).<sup>3</sup> His stature is more like that of a child than of a grown-up man, and the Green Knight, who is "[o]n þe most on þe molde on mesure hyghe" (137)<sup>4</sup> only highlights his physical inferiority, as reflection of his childish "ʒonge blod and his brayn wyld" (89).<sup>5</sup>

Arthur's inferiority is particularly noticeable when he stands before the Green Knight and takes his axe.

Now hatz Arthure his axe, and þe halme grypez,  
 And sturnely sturez hit aboute, þat stryke wyth hit þoʒt.  
 Þe stif mon hym bifore stod vpon hyʒt,  
 Herre þen ani in þe hous by þe hede and more. (330–333)<sup>6</sup>

When Arthur swings the axe, the Green Knight remains unimpressed, which means that he does not see the king as a serious threat or a worthy knight and opponent. Interestingly, the Gawain poet's portrayal of King Arthur as knight evokes the original, old English meaning of the word *cnicht* (boy, youth, servant). As Pearsall remarked, in addition to being described as "childgered" or "boyishly enthusiastic" but possibly also "child-sized," he is no match for the challenger. It seems at first that Arthur is practicing sweeps, but the phrase "mayn dintez" (336)<sup>7</sup> suggests that he is already trying his blows on the Green Knight and since he is several feet shorter, this is "actually a description of him trying vainly" (Pearsall 251–252). Additionally, the Green Knight looks down on the whole court and sees the present courtiers as "berdlez chylder" (280).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> "his youth [...] so merry" / "moods of a boy" (19).

<sup>4</sup> "the mightiest on middle-earth in measure of height" (21).

<sup>5</sup> "young blood and wayward brain" (19).

<sup>6</sup> "Now Arthur holds his axe, and the haft grasping / sternly he stirs it about, his stroke considering. / The stout man before him there stood his full height / higher than any in that house by a head and yet more" (26).

<sup>7</sup> "strength of his blows" (27).

<sup>8</sup> "beardless children" (25).

Pearsall posed an important question about whether Gawain really thinks he is going to be called later to keep his promise, or if he simply thinks, as Arthur does (line 374), that if he hits the Green Knight right, there will be no next challenge, so his call to replace Arthur could “seem like a piece of hypocritical flattery and opportunism” (Pearsall 252). Here, however, one should have in mind the conventions of chivalry and knighthood, and that it is they, actually, along with their ideals, that are the true target of the poet’s subtle and skillful criticism, not the individuals themselves. When Gawain offers to take the king’s place in the challenge, he praises the court’s knights by saying that

vnder heuen I hope non hazerer of wyllle,  
Ne better bodyes on bent þer baret is rered. (352–353)<sup>9</sup>

This, obviously, is an act of chivalry, but it immediately follows Gawain’s eloquently expressed criticism that it is not suitable for a king to accept such a challenge “Whil mony so bolde yow aboute vpon bench sytten” (351).<sup>10</sup> When the Green Knight asks who the leader is, the present knights remain silent “not al for doute / Bot sum for cor-taysye” (246–247).<sup>11</sup> They are waiting for the king’s reaction and reply. However, knights were responsible for all the service due to the king, combats and warfare included, so remaining silent and seated on the benches while the king and his court are insulted and challenged may be a dire signal of the degradation of knightly values, predominantly demonstrated through the stature and conduct of the court’s king and his vassals. They all readily agree with Gawain’s proposal to take the king’s place in the tryst and although other knights are present, they refrain from offering to be the king’s champion.

The poet’s criticism of the court is not a poetic invention, nor is it removed from reality. It is more a reflection of the real picture of knighthood and knightly life, its development and problems that, at the poet’s time, had already started tainting their glossy surface. As mentioned, real-life knighthood was far from its idealized representations in literature. Real-life medieval knights actually had modest incomes and sustained themselves from rents and peasant labor. Already in the twelfth century, William of Malmesbury described them “as a class full of greed and violence,” and in the thirteenth cen-

<sup>9</sup> “on earth there are, I hold, none more honest of purpose, / no figures fairer on field where fighting is waged” (27).

<sup>10</sup> “while many bold men about you on bench are seated” (27).

<sup>11</sup> “Not only ... for dread; / but of some ‘twas their courtly way” (24).

ture there was a decline in the number of knights due to the related costs of knighting ceremonies and the knight's equipment—there were even cases of individuals wishing to avoid knighthood (Coss 46, 62–68).

With this in mind, it is hardly surprising that the literary representations of even the most prominent representatives of knighthood, including the legendary King Arthur and Sir Gawain, often thought to be the most valiant of all Arthur's knights, are less than or far from idealized. Whiting noted that only the readers who know Sir Gawain solely from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* would be surprised to read about his dissipation and loss of reputation in other works. Whiting summed up the principal reasons for the loss of Gawain's reputation, which are (1) the process of "epic degeneration" that can be seen on Gawain as well; (2) the cult of courtly love and his custom to depart immediately if a girl rebuffed him, or later anyway if she welcomed him; and (3) the Grail, whose finding required the qualities of "consecration, chastity, spirituality" and "discriminated pacifism," none of which Gawain possessed, sometimes even illustrating their opposites (Whiting 74–75).

There is no search for the Grail in the poem, but the first two reasons for this are clearly visible. Epic degradation is obvious even within this single text if one compares Gawain's conduct at the beginning and at the end of the poem. During the first meeting with the Green Knight, when Sir Gawain offers to represent the court in the challenge, he is the embodiment of prowess and loyalty, and three other qualities that Mathew specified as "persistently inculcated"—*largesse*, *franchise* and *cortaysie*; however, as he noticed, although these ideals represented an essential part of England's fourteenth-century knightly class, "it is not possible to tell how far they remained accepted by them" (70–72). As Coss remarked, there are major formulations of chivalry by representatives of the church and in romances, however, "to what extent the content of these corresponded to how the thirteenth- or fourteenth-century county knight actually felt is far from clear" since the church wished to have the knightly forces under control, and the romance was the fictive representation of the world (108).

In the Gawain poet's fictive representation of medieval reality things are far from ideal. The Green Knight, during the first encounter, is rude and insults the court, whereas Gawain remains calm, composed and courteous. The explanation is often sought for among the ideals of knighthood. As Fox noted, if Gawain



descended to the Green Knight's own level of violence, he would have already failed the test, since he would have admitted that civilized courtesy was no more than a trinket, and that it must be abandoned in an emergency. (9)

He remains civilized and courteous, but it is questionable whether he passes the test. In the poem, Gawain is later associated with five virtues, *fraunchyse*, *felaʒschyp*, *clannes*, *cortaysye*, and *pit * (652–654).<sup>12</sup> If compared with the real-life idea(l)s of knighthood, Gawain is depicted as the embodiment of *almost all* qualities that John of Salisbury wrote a knight should possess: “[O]bedience, and then physical strength, endurance, courage, and sobriety and frugality of life” (Coss 46). However, *not all* of them. Sir Gawain's *pit * is under question as he later accepts the green girdle and thus shows that, when it comes to life, he relies more on magic than on the Blessed Virgin's protection, although this is subject to discussion as he never practices or uses magic; nevertheless, he accepts the present with the hope that the magic woven into it will save him from decapitation. While not explicitly mentioned in the poem, frugality of life is another quality he lacks. Namely, he cuts off the Green Knight's head with no hesitation as the only life he actually wants to avoid wasting is his own, and possibly his king's, although the latter is questionable, as noted by Pearsall.

When he takes the green girdle, the symbol of pagan magic, Gawain shows that he is not loyal to his faith and, therefore, to his court. He hides the girdle from his host and refuses to give a gift to the lady when she visits him in his chamber, which to an extent shows the lack of largesse. Moreover, when he arrives to the Green Chapel, almost all his virtues vanish into thin air with the appearance of the mighty opponent. Not only does his wincing before the axe demonstrate a lack of courage, but his conduct before and after the Green Knight's swings shows a lack of *fraunchyse* and *cortaysie*, which is why the Green Knight criticizes him:

Bolde burne, on þis bent be not so gryndel.  
No mon here vnmanerly þe mysboden habbez,  
Ne kyd bot as couenaunde at kyngez kort schaped. (2339–2340)<sup>13</sup>

By the Green Chapel, the Green Knight is the one who demonstrates *cortaysie* and *fraunchyse*, and another virtue that Gawain lacked dur-

<sup>12</sup> “free-giving,” “friendliness,” “chastity,” “chivalry,” “piety” (36).

<sup>13</sup> “Fearless knight on this field, so fierce do not be! / No man here unmannerly hath thee maltreated, / nor aught given thee not granted by agreement at court” (87).

ing their first meeting—the frugality of life. The Green Knight spares Gawain’s life even though he has all the reasons to hack his head off, not only because Gawain agreed to it but also because he failed to honor the word given before Arthur’s entire court. The Green Knight, who initially appears to be rude and uncouth, eventually becomes the embodiment of the virtues that knights of old times (should) possess. In the twelfth century, according to Orderic Vitalis, they were “reluctant to kill fellow knights, pitying knightly prisoners and allowing them free on parole” (Coss 49), which again are the traits that Gawain failed to demonstrate in the very heart of knighthood, in Camelot, when the Green Knight appeared with his challenge. Although the visitor requested to exchange the blows, Gawain was not reluctant and showed no pity. Furthermore, he does descend to what at the beginning appears to be, as Fox calls it, “the Green Knight’s own level.” During their second meeting, when instead of kings, queens and courtiers only the terrible giant is present, Gawain shows that he is willing to abandon civilized courtesy as a trinket just to save his life. Without the noble audience, Gawain no longer needs to make an effort to adorn his actions and words with a veil of courtesy; or perhaps it is fear for his own life that takes over. Whichever the case, he fails in his *cortaysie*.

Gawain is also not immune to the second reason for the loss of reputation that Whiting specified—courtly love, although his proneness to it is greatly obscured by the bedroom scenes of temptation that foreground his chastity and courtesy in dealing with the delicate situation that demands from the knight to avoid insult to the lady at any cost, but also to honor the hospitality of his host, the lord of the castle. His conduct, seemingly, is not in line with the reputation he has among the courtiers of Hautdesert who hope “þat may hym here / Schal lerne of luf-talkyng” (926–927).<sup>14</sup> However, his skill to avoid the lady’s advances demonstrates considerable experience in courtly love and love talk, and proves that he is not as naïve as he presents himself to be, confirming Kinney’s conclusion that he is “quite in keeping with Gauvain of French courtly romance” (467). He successfully resists the lady’s advances and at the same time proves his courtesy. Moreover, some authors like Bloomfield pointed to the possible connections between the bedroom scenes and the critical attitude towards the idea that sexual virility contributed to military achievements, so the Gawain poet, like Thomas Bradwardine, is perhaps “trying to combat this idea by showing us hero chaste as well as courageous” (15).

<sup>14</sup> “Who hears him will, I ween, / of love-speech learn some art” (44).

Yet, Gawain might not be as chaste as it seems because there are details that hint at his appetites and potentially cast a shadow over his immaculate chastity. For example, following his arrival and dinner at Hautdesert, when everyone is going to the evening prayer, Gawain is so enchanted with the beauty of the lady of the castle that Sir Bertilac has to stop him from going after her to her private niche for prayer.

De lorde loutes þerto, and þe lady als,  
 Into a cumly closet coyntly ho entrez.  
 Gawan glydez ful gay and gos þeder sone;  
 De lorde laches hym by þe lappe and ledez hym to sytte (933–936).<sup>15</sup>

One would not expect from a perfect knight to have lecherous thoughts at such a location as the chapel. And yet, he is so enchanted that he looks where she will go and then starts after her, so unconscious of what he is doing that the lord of the castle has to take him by the hand and lead him to—or, perhaps it would be better to say, put him in—his place. Although the lady's advances in Gawain's chamber leave an impression of predatory behavior, Gawain is actually the first to openly show his interest, and only after the sermon "[b]enne lyst þe lady to loke on þe knyȝt" (941).<sup>16</sup>

Later, during the temptation in the chamber, Gawain is more careful and no longer acts on impulse. However, his reluctance to accept the lady's advances could be based on something more than courtesy. Namely, during the Middle Ages adultery was a serious offence and, when caught, women were disgraced, their lovers mutilated or killed, and adultery with the lord's wife was regarded as treason (Gies and Gies 90).

On the third eve of his stay at Hautdesert, when the lord invites him to his room after everyone had left,

Gawan gef hym god day, þe godmon hym lachchez,  
 Ledes hym to his awen chambre, þe chymné bysyde. (1029-1030)<sup>17</sup>

This is a rather intimate atmosphere in which the two of them talk and Gawain answers to the lord's questions about the motives of his

<sup>15</sup> "The lord leads the way, and his lady with him; / into a goodly oratory gracefully she enters. / Gawain follows gladly, and goes there at once / and the lord seizes him by the sleeve and to a seat leads him" (44).

<sup>16</sup> "Then the lady longed to look at this knight" (45).

<sup>17</sup> "Good-day then said Gawain, but the good man stayed him, / and led him to his own chamber to the chimney-corner" (47).

arrival by saying that he seeks to find the Green Chapel. When the lord explains that the place he is looking for is near and talks him into accepting to stay until the morning of the New Year, he gaily invites the ladies to join them.

Denne sesed hym þe syre and set hym bysyde,  
 Let þe ladyez be fette to lyke hem þe better.  
 Ðer watz seme solace by hemself stille;  
 Ðe lorde let for luf lotez so myry,  
 As wyȝ þat wolde of his wyte, ne wyst quat he myȝt. (1083–1087)<sup>18</sup>

The identities of these ladies are never revealed. They could be the lady of the castle and her old chaperon, but it is more likely that these are some other ladies. If one of them were the lady of the castle, after spending a lot of time together in pleasant and intimate conversations—“Such comfort of her compaynye caȝten togeder / Ðurȝ her dere dalyaunce of her derne wordez” (1011–1012)<sup>19</sup>—it is highly unlikely that Gawain would not interact with her on this occasion. The lord later loudly speaks the terms of their agreement to exchange the gifts so that everyone can hear and he mentions his wife in a way that implies that she is not present: “When ȝe wyl, wyth my wyf, þat wyth yow schal sitte” (1098).<sup>20</sup> After the agreement has been confirmed, the partying seems rather relaxed.

Pay dronken and daylyeden and dalten vntyȝtel,  
 Ðise lordez and ladyez, quyle þat hem lyked;  
 And syþen with Frenkysch fare and fele fayre lotez  
 Pay stoden and stemed and stylyly speken,  
 Kysten ful comlyly and kaȝten her leue. (1114–1118)<sup>21</sup>

These “lordez and ladyez” have a good time drinking and conversing, “with Frenkysch fare and fele fayre lotez” so Gawain is here in the

<sup>18</sup> “The lord then seized him and set him in a seat beside him, and let the ladies be sent for to delight them the more, / for their sweet pleasure there in peace by themselves. / For love of him that lord was as loud in his mirth / as one near out of his mind who scarce knew what he meant” (49).

<sup>19</sup> “in companionship took such pleasure together / in sweet society soft words speaking” (47).

<sup>20</sup> “when you wish with my wife, who with you shall sit” (49).

<sup>21</sup> “they drank and they dallied, and they did as they pleased, / these lords and ladies, as long as they wished, / and then with customs of France and many courtly phrases / they stood in sweet debate and soft words bandied, / and lovingly they kissed, their leave taking” (50).

company that is familiar with the French manners and courtly love and he is not excepted from them. They kissed “ful comlyly” and although the kissing is in the same line with “kaʒten her leue” it does not necessarily mean that the two events immediately take place one after the other. Given their indulgence in the French manners, this could be yet another example of the poet’s verbal subtleness.

Gawain’s failure to remain true to all knightly virtues could be interpreted as criticism of the entire system, the court and knighthood in general, skillfully cloaked in ideals and virtues that fail when practiced outside the court and in real life. Behind the walls of the court, knights can be chivalrous, courteous, brave and pious at celebrations, tournaments and in other formal and *controlled* situations. Outside this zone of comfort, when the rules can change arbitrarily, and when the opponent is unpredictable and not as protocolary as at court, the ideals of knighthood, embodied in the knights of the Round Table, can easily fail the test. Therefore, the Green Knight’s words and insults from the beginning of the poem, seemingly undue and rude, ring quite true near the end.

Although the poem has some unexpected twists and turns in the form of elements that clearly criticize the ideals, it is by all means a romance if we agree with Bloomfield that “not all romances are straightforward tales of adventures,” that it is not a simple but a fairly complex genre and that “there are many varieties of romance.” Bloomfield called this poem “witty, ironical, and religious” and he believed that it was meant to entertain and teach a sophisticated audience (16–18). The Gawain poet was not as explicitly critical as his contemporaries Chaucer and Langland, but the sophisticated readers, his intended audience, could recognize in the poem, as well as in real life around them, signs that knighthood and ideals of chivalry had become rough around the edges. Benson saw the Gawain poet’s attitude toward romance, and his relation to his own time, as “ambivalent” and, as he pointed out, “the sophisticated man of the fourteenth century had only to look about him to see that the romance ideal no longer fit for the life he knew” (30–31). The obviousness of such a state, however, does not mean that the poet should not be sophisticated in his literary efforts, particularly in work intended for the sophisticated contemporaries, to whom Sir Gawain actually served as an instrument to show that the idolized virtues and principles have been debased to mere “trinkets.” The contemporary reader, however, may find the poet’s subtleness elusive to an extent, not only because the intended message is conveyed through one individual who is the embodiment of the entire society, but also due to

the misconceptions stemming from the representations of such society in popular culture.

The green girdle, Sir Gawain's token of shame and imperfection, and its acceptance by all the knights of Camelot, emphasizes the debasement of ideals to trinkets. Sir Gawain leaves Camelot with an image of the pentagram and he returns to it with the symbol of his failure and that "watz acorded þe renoun of þe Rounde Table, / And he honoured þat hit hade euermore after" (2519–2520).<sup>22</sup> The chivalric code started forming during the twelfth century but was formalized in the fourteenth, particularly during the Hundred Years War and owing to Edward III who founded the Order of the Garter, whose credo is written at the end of the poem. However, one should have in mind that the credo was added later, and although its meaning easily prompts the reader to relate it to the girdle, it is doubtful, as Andrew and Waldron have noted, whether the connection was intended (300). For Friedman and Osberg, the assumption of such a connection is problematic since the credo was added later, however, "it is relevant to inquire why a near contemporary reader should have thought it was about the founding of the Order of the Garter" (314). Perhaps the reader who added it later wanted to emphasize that the poem *should* be read as the confirmation of the chivalric code and not of its dissipation, particularly when one has in mind the subtle criticism woven into its lines.

And not always subtle. The readers easily get the impression that Sir Gawain leaves the castle with the girdle tied under his armor, probably due to the fact that he initially hid it from Sir Bertilac (Friedman and Osberg 312). On the morning of his leave from Hautdesert, "His cote wyth þe conysaunce of þe clere werkez" (2026),<sup>23</sup> and as noted by Malarkey and Toelken, the girdle that was wrapped over the surcoat with the pentagram symbolizes "his defection from the virtues of the pentangle," meaning that the girdle supersedes them both spiritually and physically as he rides to his "moment of truth" unaware of the externalization of his moral condition (19–20).

It is important to notice that in the culture of chivalry and knight-hood there is no privacy, so what is not seen does not exist—only what is visible and public or, in this case, worn in the open, can serve a purpose. This is the principal reason why Gawain has to take the girdle to Camelot, as the wound inflicted by the Green Knight will eventu-

<sup>22</sup> "was reckoned the distinction of the Round Table, / and honour was his that had it evermore after" (92).

<sup>23</sup> "his coat-armour, with the cognisance of the clear symbol" (77).

ally heal and become invisible. As pointed out by Campbell, the hero of the monomyth “is honored by his society, frequently unrecognized or disdained,” and he and his world suffer from “a symbolical deficiency,” and he typically achieves a macroscopic triumph (37–38). The Gawain poet locates these deficiencies most obviously in the childish King Arthur, whose boyish behavior and stature present not only an inferior king, but also a morally corrupt society. While the girdle that Gawain brings to Camelot undoubtedly transforms the society, it remains unclear whether the transformation is intended to regenerate it or push it further down the path of dissipation.

The externalization of the pagan symbol and its dominance over the Christian one, as much as the pentagram as the Christian symbol and its ties to Christianity are rather problematic, shows that Gawain has more faith in magical powers than in those of his Christian faith. He never openly calls for or relies on the protection of the pentagram, and near the end of the poem its importance almost dissolves in contrast to the emphasis put on the girdle.

The image of the Blessed Mary on Sir Gawain’s shield is not the poet’s invention and it can be interpreted as the symbol of piety. Geoffrey’s Arthur also had a “a circular shield called Pridwen, on which there was painted a likeness of the Blessed Mary, Mother of God” (Geoffrey of Monmouth 193). As noted by Hardman, the Virgin Mary’s protection is not required in battle “but in the encounters in the bedroom” (255). The presence and position of the image may serve as yet another subtle indicator of shaken faith and compromised knightly virtues. The image of Mary is on the inner surface of Sir Gawain’s shield so that it would always be in his range of vision, but this is also a less visible surface and it could be an allusion to a less knightly trait. Namely, as pointed out by Coss, already in the latter part of the twelfth century there was an increase in the number of knights who rarely fought, and these knights “without skill and practice in arms” as Nigel de Longchamp of Canterbury wrote, were called “Holy Mary’s knights” (Coss 44). The knights who remain seated on the benches when the Green Knight challenges their king, and Sir Gawain, who wears the shield with Holy Mary’s image on it, could be a direct allusion to such honorific knight-hood that fails to demonstrate its strength and reputation in practice.

The foregrounding of the pagan symbol of the pentagram infused with Christian symbolism and the backgrounding of the Christian symbol of the Blessed Mary could be the reflection of the poet’s attitude towards the official Church. Religion is another matter worth considering from the point of view of historical and literary circumstances.

Christianity was deeply rooted in all aspects of medieval life due to the power and influence of the Church as the feudal force and the center of literacy. Again, Chaucer and Langland are well known examples of the church receiving critical treatment in Middle English literature, but the Gawain poet, although subtler, is also critical, which is not surprising as chivalry and religion were deeply intertwined.

Fantasy worlds are reflections of the reader's objective reality, "its mirror images, although twisted and reshaped by imagination" (Jakovljević and Lončar-Vujnović 112), and similarly, the "fictional literature of medieval Europe sometimes reflected the realities of medieval life, sometimes distorted them, sometimes provided escapist release from them, and sometimes held up ideals for reality to imitate" (Kieckhefer 1). The combination of the real and the fantastic makes the representation of the reflection more credible.

As Tolkien noted,

The "Faerie" may with its strangeness and peril enlarge the adventure, making the test more tense and more potent, but Gawain is presented as a credible, living, person; and all that he thinks, or says, or does, is to be seriously considered, as of the real world. (4)

One might notice then that the Green Knight is no less real. The depiction of the key elements and symbols of chivalry and knighthood—such as Sir Gawain being the representative of Camelot, the central society being the reflection of the actual world, and the presence of their opposites, such as the Green Knight as the representative of the forces outside Camelot, its reflection in the image of its twisted double—reveal the true nature of the reflection and, in this case, the world as the reflection of the reflection. Camelot and Hautdesert are the obverse and the reverse of the same world. Sir Bertilac's castle and his lady are the secret sharers of the Christian court, its dark and corrupt reflections associated with magic, paganism and wilderness that reveal all that is wrong under the glossy and imperfect surface of *pité* and *cortaysye*.

As Benson pointed out a long time ago, a romance is not supposed to end the way *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* does, meaning that "the glorious affirmation of the hero's virtues and of the ideal he represents is conspicuously absent" (29). At the end, all knights of the Round Table accept the girdle as a reminder that failure to resist unchristian forces could happen to each and every one of them, but it could also mean that they all want the protection of pagan magic in case it can protect, by any chance, one's head from a deadly axe. And the future of the kingdom and its Christian knighthood is rather grim, as the



poet reminds the reader at the end when he mentions Troy again and invokes its fate described at the beginning. If mighty and magnificent Troy fell, so will Arthur's Camelot, and Britain, and Christianity, and eventually every other power in the world, in the never-ending cycle of birth, life, death and re-birth, embodied in "þe endeles knot" (630),<sup>24</sup> with no beginning and no end; and just like "vche lyne vmbelappez and loukez in oþer" (628),<sup>25</sup> so are all the elements of the story in the poem intertwined: the court and the wilderness, the past and the present, the present and the future, Christianity and paganism, real-life knights and those rendered by poetry.

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is the poem which praises chivalry and knighthood, more by way of showing what has been lost than by means of their overt affirmation. Through skillful use of Christian symbolism and the notable absence of a moral to the story, the Gawain poet created an ambivalent, even subversive story and thus made an atypical romance (Jakovljević 224). This, in turn, permits the reader the freedom to interpret it in his or her own way, despite the credo at the poem's end that suggests affirmative interpretation, or warns not to submit to its negation.

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<sup>24</sup> "the Endless Knot" (35).

<sup>25</sup> "each line overlaps and is linked with another" (35).

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## *Sir Gawain in Zeleni vitez*: ne ravno viteška ljubezenska zgodba

Ključne besede: angleška književnost / srednjeveška književnost / viteško pesništvo / *Sir Gawain in Zeleni vitez* / ljubezen / viteštvo / kavalirstvo

Angleška srednjeveška ljubezenska pesnitev *Sir Gawain in Zeleni vitez* je edinstvena ne le po obliki, vsebini in zgradbi, temveč tudi po pesnikovi spretni rabi konvencij, v kateri se poigrava z bralčevimi pričakovanji tako, da uvaja prvine, ki naredijo pesnitev čudovito dvoumno in jo umeščajo v področje, kjer se – nejasno razmejeni – prekrivata realnost in fikcija. Čeprav pesnitev na prvi pogled slavi moč in čistost kavalirstva in viteštva, ju v resnici podvrže subtilni kritiki in komentiranju njenega neuspeha v resničnem življenju zunaj dvora. To je še posebej očitno, ko simboliko pesnitve ter njenega junaka in družbo, iz katere izhaja, beremo v zgodovinskem kontekstu, tj. kot odraz dejanskega srednjeveškega življenja. V skladu s tem je mogoče pesnitev *Sir Gawain in Zeleni vitez* brati kot besedilo, ki kavalirstvo in viteštvo bolj kot z odkrito naklonjenostjo časti s komentarjem na njuno postopno razblinjanje, saj gre za čas, ko je prihodnost na zunaj sijočega, v resnici pa načetega kraljestva, njegovih vladarjev in družbe ob dejanjih vse prej kot brezmadežnih krščanskih vitezov videti precej temačna.

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