

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: Fitt 2

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1. STRUCTURAL DIFFERENCES: FITT 1 TO FITT 2

The action of Fitt 1 of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* took place entirely in a single setting: the great hall of Camelot.² The great hall is enormous: it is large enough to contain everyone who has come for Christmas, as well as the castle's usual residents; it is big enough for a massive man to ride in on a huge horse; and so it is large enough to stage all the events of the first fitt. Other parts of the castle are mentioned – the assembled company emerges from the chapel, freed from religious obligations and ready for pleasure and leisure; the dishes for the feast are obviously brought in from the kitchen area – but none of these other locations is described; and this seems deliberate on the poet's part, for the strong focus on the hall reinforces the sense of a unified Camelot, and makes the uninvited guest seem even more of an outsider: disruptive, symbolizing an alien world and a hostile winter that have been very firmly excluded from the scene.

Fitt 2, conversely, offers a selection of settings, and reverses the symbolism of Fitt 1. Where the outsider (the Green Knight) came into the court, now the court (represented by Gawain) leaves the safety of Camelot, passing into an outside world whose hostility is shown clearly to the audience. As J. A. Burrow observes, the winter outside has no place in Fitt 1, but in Fitt 2 it

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Slide numbers shown in the present document refer to the unannotated file 'SGGK Fitt 2 - online slides.pdf', available from the same source as this document. A list of illustrations is appended to the Bibliography.

² *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. by J. A. Burrow. Penguin Classics: Penguin English Poets (1972; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987)

is emphasized.³ Gawain travels through a landscape made eerie by winter and dangerous both by the severe cold and by a variety of aggressors before arriving at a castle; a familiar kind of setting, but this time the poet will utilize a variety of rooms. This use of multiple settings will characterize the rest of the poem, and thus, by contrast, maintain the sense of Fitt 1 as different.

2. *VOX POPULI* – CAMELOT’S MUTTERINGS

After the first Christmas, the year passes quickly, and soon the whole of Camelot begins to think, sorrowfully (lines 539–61), of Gawain’s impending journey. As he presents Gawain’s rather flashily executed departure, the poet returns to the theme, and this time he articulates – in a surprisingly lengthy passage and using some direct speech – the court’s criticism of King Arthur in allowing the life of such a fine knight to be wasted for a mere game:

He sperred the stede with the spures and sprang on his way,
So stif that the stone-fire stroke out thereafter.
All that sey that semly syked in hert,
And sayd sothly all same segges til other,
Carande for that comly: ‘By Cryst, hit is scathe
That thou, lede, schal be lost, that art of lif noble.
To finde his fere upon folde in fayth is not ethe.
Wareloker to have wroght had more wyt bene
And have dight yonder dere a duk to have worthed.
A lowande leder of ledes in londe him wel semes,
And so had better have bene then brittened to noght,
Haded with an alvisch mon for angardes pryde.
Who knew ever any kyng such counsel to take
As knightes in cavelaciouns on Cristmasse games!’ (lines 670–83)

This is a telling moment: these knights who are muttering amongst themselves are Arthur’s liegemen, vassals who owe him loyalty and service; they are also the same knights who failed to come forward when the Green Knight challenged the court’s – and thus their own – reputation in Fitt 1. This representation of *vox populi* (‘the voice of the people’: general opinion) is not uncommon in medieval romance, and it will be used again later in the same fitt. Here the poet exploits it both as a reminder that Gawain is leaving in pursuit of his own death, and as a reminder of the Green Knight’s earlier characterization of the court as young and inexperienced, as “berdles childer” (line 280). It’s not entirely apparent how the audience is to respond to this muttering; are the knights right in characterizing SG’s life as wasted over a mere game? Or is the game more important than they appreciate? Certainly, in Fitt 1, it seems that only Arthur and Gawain seem fully to understand the meaning of the Green Knight’s slur, which simultaneously unifies them and separates them from the other figures present; and now comes a further separation, for Gawain departs for his adventure all alone.

³ *A Reading of ‘Sir Gawain and the Green Knight’* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), p. 35.

3. CHRISTIAN CHIVALRY AND GAWAIN AS A KNIGHT

‘Gawain departs for his adventure all alone’; perhaps too stark a statement. Gawain has no human companions, it is true; but he has his horse. More important than this, he will have the companionship and support offered by his faith; and the description of the knight’s preparations for departure, which echoes a traditional literary set-piece – the arming of the warrior – underline the fact that an Arthurian knight is a Christian knight; and a Christian knight is never alone.

Society in the Middle Ages is traditionally and famously divided into three ‘estates’: nobility, clergy, and peasantry. The role of the knight (i.e., the nobility) was to fight to protect king and country; the role of the clergy was to pray for king and country; while peasants were intended to feed and maintain king and country. (The estate of peasantry, of course, equates to ‘everyone else’. This tripartite division subsumes women, who have sometimes recently been termed ‘the fourth estate’, and it also ignores a whole raft of other people, many of whom will feature in *The Canterbury Tales*, such as the merchants and craftsmen who make up the emerging middle class). The knightly class and its activities had been granted religious endorsement in the early and high Middle Ages because of the Crusades, most of which were Church-sanctioned attempts to recover the Holy Land, and particularly sites associated with Jesus Christ, such as Jerusalem, from the Saracens (Muslims) and other heathens. This had legitimated warfare, so that dubbing – the formal ritual in which a young man, usually a squire, formally became a knight – gradually began to include Christian elements: vigil, confession, Mass [SLIDES 2–5].⁴ Like the baronial and royal courts of the Middle Ages, Camelot is a place where pages and squires are trained to knighthood; and in describing the assembled company emerging from the chapel after Mass (lines 62–65), Fitt 1 of the poem makes it clear that Christianity is an everyday part of courtly, and thus chivalric, life.

This, of course, is something that the medieval audience, sharing Gawain’s Catholicism, would understand at once. Even the most enthralling of medieval fictions have a didactic component; they were intended to educate as well as to entertain, and they often held a mirror up to their audience, showing the punishment of vices, and the virtues that should be embraced. As Michael J. Bennett observes,

Gawain and the Green Knight and *Pearl* reveal both a close knowledge of the aristocratic culture of the time, and a deep immersion in the worlds of chivalry and courtesy. The poet is an insider, a courtier’s courtier [...]. Moreover he assumes a courtly audience.⁵

⁴ Cf. Dominique Barthélemy, *L’Ordre seigneurial: XI^e–XII^e siècle*. Nouvelle histoire de la France moderne, vol. 3 (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1990), p. 190.

⁵ ‘The Historical Background’, in *A Companion to the Gawain-poet*, ed. by Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson. Arthurian Studies 38 (Cambridge: Brewer, 1997), pp. 71–90 (p. 81). The word ‘courtesy’ relates literally to the kinds of behaviour appropriate in court or to a courtier. *Pearl* is another of the four poems attributed to the Gawain-poet.

Knighthood, the brotherhood of chivalry, was not therefore based purely on the ability to fight from horseback,⁶ but was strongly concerned with morality, with promoting a range of moral values that a knight should espouse [SLIDE 6]. A great part of knighthood is about controlling violence and instilling discipline; and the Church had a key role in that aspect of the training. The Gawain-poet details many of the required knightly virtues through the pentangle [SLIDE 7] that he offers as a symbol of Gawain.

The poet ascribes the design of the pentangle to Solomon, who is famed for his wisdom; and in its entirety the figure represents *trauthe* (line 626). *Trauthe* is a rather slippery Middle English term, because there is no distinct Modern English equivalent and its meaning altered during the Middle Ages. It can mean *truth*, of course; but depending on the circumstances it also means *fidelity, loyalty, faithfulness, piety, constancy, honesty, commitment, honour, general goodness, and integrity*.⁷ Having established *trauthe* as key to the pentangle, the poet then goes on to relate the figure's geometry to virtues particularly appropriate to knighthood:

Forthy hit acordes to this knight and to his clere armes;
For ay faythful in fyve and sere fyve sithes
Gawayn was for good knowen, and as gold pured,
Voyded of uch vilany, with vertues ennoured
 In mote;
 Forthy the pentangel newe
 He bere in shelde and cote,
 As tulk of tale most true
 And gentylest knight of lote. (lines 631–39)⁸

The passage contains a few key points worth noting. First, the five points of virtue self-multiply within the pentangle's 'endeles' structure to total five times five sets of interlinked virtues, which the narrator goes on to describe. Their interconnection is emphasized here because it will be crucial to later events: as Burrow puts it, '[t]he virtues [...] stand and fall together, and there can be no question, for the hero, of sacrificing one in order to preserve another. [...] Just as a broken pentangle loses its magical power, so "truth" loses its moral power if it is "sundered" in any of its parts; for it is an ideal of *integrity* or oneness' (p. 50, original emphasis). Second, the poet makes a connection between Gawain and gold. Gold has featured prominently in the poem so far, adding to the sense of opulence in the great hall at Camelot, for example, and decorating

⁶ The literal meaning of chivalry, from Old French *chival*, 'horse'. See *Middle English Dictionary* [MED], ed. Frances McSparran et al. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 2001), under search term *cheval** (thus, for instance, *chevalrie*, n. <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED7519>> [accessed 13 September, 2013]).

⁷ MED, *trauthe*, n. <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED47016&egs=all&egdisplay=compact>> [accessed 13 September, 2013].

⁸ Middle English *gentil* is used to indicate high birth (i.e., the nobility or the gentry) or – as the MED has it – to someone '[h]aving the character or manners prescribed by the ideals of chivalry or Christianity'. (*gentil*, adj. <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED18403>> [accessed 13 September, 2013]). Unlike its modern counterpart, it does not suggest mildness, tenderness, or softness.

Gawain's armour and his horse's trappings. Now the poet begins to develop a new use for gold, offering it as a moral symbol: gold is pure, unalloyed, unsullied; and so the moral property it denotes is extreme purity. This symbolism will recur frequently later in the poem. Notice, too, the reference to reputation – 'Gawayn was for good knowen' (line 633) – which is another reminder of the basis of the Green Knight's challenge, and also suggests that the concept will continue to be important to the narrative. Yet there is a contradiction here, and it echoes the contradiction that Fitt 1 subtly addresses in the contrast it offers between the court's reputation on the one hand and its youth on the other. Gawain bears the pentangle on his shield and on his surcoat; but what does the poet mean by 'the pentangel newe' (line 636)?⁹ Does 'newe' mean 'freshly painted'? Has Gawain's armour been spruced up for his adventure? Or has he only recently adopted the pentangle as his symbol; and, if so, why? Has he recently been knighted (back to "berdles childer"), or has the pentangle replaced a different emblem? Again, if so, why? Is it because he believes that his quest will end in his death? There's no external evidence that can help answer these questions; and no connexion between Gawain and the pentangle has been found beyond *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

It's worth thinking for a moment about the inclusion of the description purely for itself. Derek Brewer states that

[i]t was becoming customary at the end of the fourteenth century to invent new blazons for Arthurian knights, and [...] there was a general tendency to "moralise" blazons. But the pentangle is in general very rare, and in Arthurian literature unique to *Gawain the Green Knight* as a blazon. [...] In heraldry a five-pointed star, known as a mullet, is relatively common, but not found on its own except once in a graffito on a church wall shown on the breast of a knight [...] and t]he mullet lacks the internal structure of lines and fives that makes the pentangle so significant.¹⁰

Brewer continues: 'What is called a pentagram by Pritchard is said to be very common as a graffito on medieval English parish church walls. It was often known as "Solomon's seal"' (p. 178).¹¹ The connexion with Solomon, then, apparently appears elsewhere; but a heraldic star is not usually displayed alone.

All this makes the pentangle, in theory at least, a very potent symbol of goodness. (Also, of course, impossible for a human being to live up to; but, since it is his emblem, Gawain is apparently intending, and intended, to live up to it.) Yet Richard Hamilton Green long ago identified

⁹ See *MED neue*, adj. <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/ed-idx?size=First+100&type=orths&q1=nwe&rgxp=constrained>> [accessed 13 September, 2013].

¹⁰ 'Armour II: The Arming Topos as Literature', in Brewer and Gibson, pp. 175–79 (p. 178). The *Oxford English Dictionary* [*OED*] includes these definitions under *blazon*, n., '2.a. Heraldry. A shield in heraldry; armorial bearings, coat of arms; a banner bearing the arms. [...] 3: Description or representation, according to the rules of Heraldry, of armorial bearings' (*OED Online* <<http://0-www.oed.com.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/view/Entry/20024?rskey=MUIJ0A&result=1&isAdvanced=false>> [accessed 13 September, 2013]).

¹¹ V. Pritchard, *English Medieval Graffiti* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 88.

a problem with the pentangle's connexion with Solomon, and it's a problem worth bearing in mind because references to Solomon will recur in the final fitt of the poem:

The poet could hardly have chosen a more ambiguous patron for Gawain's virtue. For Solomon is a figure of perfection; there was no man like him and his reputation reached the corners of the world (3 Kings 4.29–34). He was for the Middle Ages a figure of Christ, the exemplar of wisdom and kingship, of power over demons. But in the Bible, and everywhere in the exegetical tradition, he is a gravely flawed figure, remarkably wise, but in the end guilty of follies that cost him his kingdom; and though he had power over demons, he was ultimately their victim, for his weakness for women turned him away from God and he built temples to the powers of darkness (3 Kings 11.1–9). In the late Middle Ages theologians debated whether or not he was saved.¹²

The pentangle is on the shield's outer surface, identifying Gawain to the world, literally and symbolically; but the poet also refers to the image depicted on the inner face of the shield:

And wheresoever this mon in melly was stad,
His thro thought was in that, thurgh all other thinges,
That all his forsnes he fong at the fyve joys
That the hende heven-quene had of hir childe –
At this cause the knight comly had
In the inore half of his shelde hir image depaynted,
That when he blushed therto his belde never payred. (lines 644–50)

This is what Gawain sees, what he wishes to focus on in battle: he will draw his strength and courage from remembering the five joys that 'the hende heven-quene' – the Virgin Mary – had of her son.

Modern readers might find this an odd, even an inappropriate, image to have painted on knightly paraphernalia, but Christ's mother holds a special place in medieval Christianity. She is revered for her purity, which is seen in her unbroken chastity: as Marina Warner puts it, 'The cult of Mary is inextricably interwoven with Christian ideas about the dangers of the flesh and their special connection with women'.¹³ In medieval thought, Mary redeemed the sin of Eve, the fallen temptress, and thus represents the opposite of human sexual sin. This will have resonance in Fitt 3, and again in Fitt 4: the poet is using the image of Mary here to pave the way for themes to follow. The Virgin Mary is also known for her loyalty, which is symbolized by her blue robe [SLIDE 8]. The colour of her garments is not specified in the poem, but as Elizabeth A. Hoffman points out, 'During the century before *Gawain* was written, the Virgin Mary had come to be portrayed almost exclusively in blue. While her blue cloak was rare in paintings and illuminations before 1300, during the next century the situation reversed itself, and she appears cloaked in blue in virtually every artistic portrayal, while at the same time the Cult of the Virgin vastly increased the frequency of these artistic representations [...]. There is a high probability, therefore, that the audience of *Gawain* would have visualized the earlier reference to Mary on

¹² 'Gawain's Shield and the Quest for Perfection', *English Literary History*, 29 (1962), 121–39 (pp. 130–31).

¹³ *Alone of all Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Knopf, 1976), p. 60.

Gawain's shield as a figure robed in blue'.¹⁴ There is no illumination of Gawain's shield in the manuscript, but the topos of the arming of the hero is a tradition in Arthurian literature, and is often found in chronicle; and one manuscript, held in the British Library and dating from the first half of the fourteenth century, shows King Arthur with a shield which depicts, on a gules (red) field on its outer surface, the Virgin and her child, with Mary dressed in blue [SLIDE 9].

The reference to the Virgin's image on Gawain's shield might be brief, but the audience is supposed to keep it in mind. Gawain's faith in the Virgin's aid will prove crucial to him, while the colour blue will appear at an important point in Fitt 3 and take its place among the poem's range of symbolic colours.

4. NEW SETTINGS (I): THE OUTSIDE WORLD

The poet treats Gawain's journey through the inhospitable countryside fairly briefly. The recent arming scene, where attendants help the knight with his armour, suggests that, since he travels alone, he will have to remain in it until he finds someone who can help him out of (and back into) it again – not a very comfortable prospect, and pretty chilly! The poet's representation of the relentless cold is very effective; and Gawain's many enemies are obviously another reason he needs to be girded for battle at all times. The poet rather self-consciously resists the temptation to describe Gawain's foes and fights: 'So mony mervayl by mount there the mon findes | Hit wer too tor for to telle of the tenthe dole', he says (lines 717–18), supplying only a brief overview of the range of adversaries. This is a fine dig at the some of the writers of the period, hack-writers of romance who unnecessarily padded out their narratives with a series of random fights with no relevance to the plot.

What does the poet focus on instead? One thing is Gawain's failure to find anyone who has heard of the Green Knight or the Green Chapel:

And ay he frayned as he ferde at frekes that he met
If thay had herd any carp of a knight grene,
In any grounde therabout of the Green Chapel;
And all nikked him with nay, that never in her live
Thay seye never no segge that was of such hewes
Of grene.

(lines 703–08)

The negation here is insistent and reinforced by alliteration that extends into a second line; the 'nikked him [...] nay', the repetition of *never* and its close juxtaposition to 'never no' all help to emphasize the fact that Gawain's search takes him further and further away from the places and people he knows.

¹⁴ 'A Re-hearing of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *Essays in Medieval Studies*, 2 (1985), 66–85 (pp. 71–72).

The poet's other focus is on Gawain's faith, as for instance when he explains how the knight survives, by being brave and resolute and by serving God (line 724); when he prays to Mary to guide him to somewhere to stay at Christmas (lines 736–39, 753–58); and when he is shown praying and lamenting on his sins, crossing himself again and again, and saying “‘Cros Cryst me spede!’” (line 762) – and Burrow usefully points to the fact that this means that ‘The faultless Gawain *has* faults’ (p. 53, original emphasis). When he first sees the castle, Gawain thanks Jesus and St Julian (line 774), who is connected with travellers and hospitality. It's noteworthy that these references to faith closely surround the moment when Gawain notices the beautiful castle – though this point will be better examined with the benefit of the hindsight offered by Fitt 4.

5. NEW SETTINGS (II): CASTLE HAUTDESERT AND ITS OCCUPANTS

The first inhabitant Gawain encounters is the porter at the gate. This is a literary motif, and the personality and attitude of the gatekeeper frequently act as a guide to the nature of the household.¹⁵ Here, the gatekeeper is friendly and welcoming, and he immediately evokes St Peter as he answers Gawain's call, at once suggesting that this is a Christian household. (This will be echoed later: the food Gawain is given is a meal of fish, suitable for a fast day such as Christmas Eve; and, like Camelot, the castle has its own chapel, where the household attends Christmas Eve Mass.) The porter is quick to obtain permission for Gawain to enter, and returns from his mission with various attendants who lead Gawain into the warm hall. There he is greeted by the lord of the castle, who has come down from his own apartments to welcome his unexpected guest, and who himself takes Gawain to a private chamber. Note the description of the host, a huge man with a generous beard, and of his castle, with its rich decorations intended to set up a comparison with Camelot.¹⁶

Many events happen quite quickly in the rest of the fitt. First the attendants serving Gawain his supper tactfully enquire who he is, and the information soon spreads round the castle. The host laughs with pleasure at the news (lines 908–09), while the younger men (squires-in-training and perhaps some recently dubbed knights) hope to learn skills from Gawain. It is not, however, his ability in battle that interests them, but his proficiency in courtly discourse:

Uch segge ful softly sayd to his fere:
‘Now schal we semely se slyghtes of thewes
And the techles termes of talkyng noble,

¹⁵ Cf. *Macbeth*, for instance.

¹⁶ The host will not be named until nearly the end of the poem. His wife is never named, which Derek Brewer sees as ‘highly significant’, and he observes that commentators who call her ‘Lady Bertilak’ are committing ‘a solecism as absurd’ as referring to Guenore as ‘Queen Arthur’ would be (‘Some Names’, in Brewer and Gibson, pp. 191–95 (p. 195)).

Wich spede is in speche unspured may we lerne,
 Syn we have fonged that fyne fader of nurture.
 God has geven us his grace goodly for sothe,
 That such a gest as Gawayn grauntes us to have
 When burnes blithe of his burthe schal sitte
 And syng.
 In menyng of maneres mere
 This burn now schal us bryng.
 I hope that may him here
 Schal lern of luf-talkyng.'

(lines 915–27)

This needs some thought. The attendants are talking about Gawain, who, until this very moment, has been presented only as a virtuous and moral Christian knight. Why, then, do they imagine that they will be able to learn techniques of *luf-talkyng* from him; and with or to whom is he going to be talking about love? The second question is easier to answer briefly: the attendants' speech communicates to the audience that the household includes at least one attractive young woman with whom Gawain will be able to bandy words, even to flirt. The former question, however, taps into a tradition that the original audience would be well aware of; but modern audiences might well not: Gawain the rake.

The Arthurian romance tradition went through various incarnations as it developed, sometimes altering its focus, often introducing new characters, sometimes recasting older characters. Chrétien de Troyes, the French author who seems to have been the first to write down Arthurian romances, in the late 1100s, began by focussing on individual knights and their adventures, both martial and amorous, but left unfinished a final text that shows a change of direction: *Perceval, the Story of the Grail*, a work continued by various other medieval writers. While Gawain has been linked with virtues in the description of his shield, even early in his career in the romance tradition his behaviour towards women is not always laudable; and, as Cory J. Rushton points out, he gradually degenerates into a rake, a man with a propensity for amorous adventures and dubious treatment of women.¹⁷ This dual reputation, of which the original audience would have been well aware, is what the Gawain-poet now addresses. The poet will draw upon Gawain's reputation as a philanderer in the events that follow, articulating the conundrum inherent in chivalric romance: can – and, if so, how can – a man be both a virtuous, Christian, moral knight – here, one who specifically aligns himself with the Virgin Mary, known for chastity above all else – and a lover?

More of that in Fitts 3 and 4, although Fitt 2 does offer a further indication that the amorous Gawain will be a focus: this is in the scene when he meets his host's wife, and another woman

¹⁷ 'The Lady's Man: Gawain as Lover in Middle English Literature', in *The Erotic in the Literature of Medieval Britain*, ed. by Amanda Hopkins and Cory James Rushton (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2007), pp. 27–37. The essay is available for download ([here](#)) by students on this course (login needed. Copyrighted, and reproduced by permission of the author: do not distribute).

of high rank. For the predominantly male audience, in a time well before any conception of political correctness, this passage mingled eroticism with rather unkind humour, as the two women are presented in direct contrast. Gawain feasts his eyes on the younger woman, whose beauty is so enhanced by the older woman's lack of it:

[...] unlyke on to loke tho ladies were,
For if the yong was yep, yelwe was that other.
Rich red on that one rayled aywhere;
Rogh wronkled chekes that other on rolled.
Kerhofes of that one with mony cler perles
Hir brest and hir bryght throte bare displayed,
Schon shyrrer then snowe that shedes on hilles;
That other with a gorger was gered over the swyre,
Chymbled over hir blake chyn with chalkwhyte vayles,
Hir frount folden in silk, enfoubled aywhere,
Toret and treleted with trifles aboute,
That noght was bare of that burde bot the blake browes,
The twayne yen and the nase, the naked lypes,
And those were soure to se and sellyly blered.
A mensk lady on mold mon may hir calle,
For Gode.
Hir body was schort and thik,
Hir buttokes balwe and brode;
More lykkerwys on to lyk
Was that scho had on lode. (lines 950–969)

The use of colour here echoes the use of colour throughout the text. The predominant colours in the passage are red and white, and both women are connected with white; but the younger woman's white skin shines with health, and is compared with snow, while the older woman's white skin is deadened, like chalk. Note also the use – unique in the poem (Hoffman, p. 70) – of the colour yellow, used to indicate the older woman's withered appearance. This woman is dressed in black, and enveloped in clothing, with just her face showing, from eyebrows to lips; the younger woman meanwhile has left her neck and chest uncovered [SLIDES 10–11]. The poet is careful to alert the audience that the viewpoint here is Gawain's own: the younger woman is 'wener than Wenore, as the wye thought' (line 945). This leaves no room for doubt that Gawain finds his host's wife attractive; and also obliquely suggests that he is attracted to Guenore, which is perhaps intended as a reminder of the adultery that tainted King Arthur's court in the medieval romance tradition. In the line following this passage (line 970), the narrator also plants in the audience's mind a brief suggestion that there may be a mutual attraction between Gawain and the host's wife.

The religious service over, the household repairs to the great hall, where alcohol, games and laughter are freely available; as they are again the next day, and the next, and the next – the third day, St John's Day (dedicated to St John the Evangelist), the last day of the holiday (lines 1022–23). The following day the guests will leave, and Gawain intends to be among them; but

the host asks Gawain why he had been travelling in the bitter winter, and, discovering his quest, reveals that he knows the location of the Green Chapel, insists that Gawain stay longer, and proposes a programme of activity: the lord and his men will go hunting, and Gawain will stay at the castle, resting, and recovering his strength. To make it more interesting, however, the lord proposes a game: he and Gawain will exchange in the evening whatever they have gained during the day. This becomes the focus of the last lines of the fitt: the agreement between the two men – sealed with a drink and, in the final wheel, the frequent repetition of the terms of the agreement as ‘thay [...] | Recorded covenantes oft’ (lines 1122–23) – offers a small cliffhanger: pottering at leisure in the castle, what might Gawain gain that he could exchange?

APPENDIX: SOME STYLISTIC ISSUES

The Gawain-poet makes exquisite use of sound and silence. This first occurred in Fitt 1 – the vivid description of household’s noisy emergence from the chapel, for instance, and the wonderful effect of complete silence when the Green Knight enters – and the poet remains conscious of the effects of sounds and silence throughout the poem.

All poets have to be aware of the sounds they are producing, especially at a time when most people heard poems; there is no point in eye-rhymes and other visual effects when most of the audience will never see them. An alliterative poet, composing narrative rather than lyrical verse, requires a particular kind of focus on the effects of sound; he needs to have a large vocabulary, with many synonyms; he must select words carefully so as to coincide alliteration with rhythmic stresses and thus flag particular words or points, as the Gawain-poet does in line 706:

And all nikked him with nay, that never in her live	(plain line)
And all níkked him with náy, that néver in her líve	(stressed syllables marked ´)
And all n ikked him with n ay, that n ever in her live	(alliteration emboldened)
And all níkked him with náy, that néver in her líve	(coinciding alliteration and stresses)

This helps drive the narrative and flag the key point(s), and also it guides the reader – or reader/performer, perhaps – to respond appropriately to the action being described; the sounds themselves can act as stage directions.

Consider some examples from passages in today’s lecture. Camelot’s mutterings begin with alliteration involving /s/ sounds and then introduce harder /k/ -sounds.

He **s**perred the **s**tede with the **s**pures and **s**prang on his way,
 So **s**tif that the **s**tone-fire **s**troke out thereafter.
 All that **s**ey that **s**emly **s**yked in hert,
 And **s**ayd **s**othly all **s**ame **s**egges til other,
Carande for that **c**omly: ‘By **C**ryst, hit is **s**cathe

That thou, lede, *s*chal be lost, that art of lif noble.
 [...]

 Who *k*new ever any *kyng* *s*uch *c*ounsel to *tak*e
 As *k*nichtes in *c*avelaciouns on *C*ristmasse games!' (lines 670–75, 682–83)

The /s/ sounds are fricatives (cf. /f/, /v/, /z/); esses offer a hissing sibilance that clearly evokes a whispered dissatisfaction. This is reinforced by the alliteration being sustained across four complete lines (670–73), and supported by some esses in subordination positions, such as the ends of words, which all intensifies the sound and the tone. The /k/ sounds are aspirated (cf. /p/, /t/): kays make a hard noise that seems to express a more forceful, and certainly a negative, criticism. The effect is particularly strong in the climactic final two lines of the direct speech (682–83), where the alliteration on /k/ is supported by a counterpoint of repeated sibilant esses, suggesting a louder whispering and a stronger complaint.

The /s/ recurs, supported by the fricative /f/, in the excited whispering of the attendants at Hautdesert when they discover Gawain's identity:

Uch *s*egge ful *s*oftly *s*ayd to his *f*ere:
 'Now *s*chal we *s*emely *s*e *s*lyghtes of thewes
 And the techles termes of talkyng noble,
 Wich *s*pede is in *s*peche un*s*pired may we lerne,
*S*yn we have *f*onged that *f*yne *f*ader of nurture.' (lines 915–19)

Note, too, that in a similar manner to the alliterative lines, full or partial alliteration may occur in the rhymed wheels and be reinforced by similar echoes:

'In *m*enyng of *m*aneres *m*ere
 This *b*urn now schal us *b*ryng,
 I *h*ope that may *h*im *h*ere
 Schal *l*ern of *l*uf-tal*l*kyng.' (924–27)

Hir *b*ody was schort and *t*hik,
 Hir *b*uttokes *b*alwe and *b*rode;
 More *l*ykkerwys on to *l*yk
 Was that scho had on *l*ode. (966–69)

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List of Illustrations on Slides

- Slide** **Title and source** [all last accessed 13 September, 2013; illustrations are linked from the slides]
- 1 'British Library MS Cotton Nero A.x. (art. 3) f. 097/101 verso (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* lines 478-514)', *London, British Library MS Cotton Nero A.x. (art. 3): A Digital Facsimile and Commented Transcription*. Publications of the Cotton Nero A.x. Project 3. Calgary: University of Calgary, Cotton Nero A.x. Project, 2012 <http://contentdm.ucalgary.ca/cdm4/item_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/gawain&CISOPTR=303&CISOBX=1&REC=2>¹⁸
 - 3 'Le Rituel de l'adoubement' (thirteenth century, source not shown). Reproduced from 'La féodalité à cheval sur les principes', *Le Cercle médiéval*, n.d. <<http://lecerclemedieval.fr/bb.net/t384-la-feodalite-a-cheval-sur-les-principes-1ere-partie>>
 - 4 'Jean II adoubant des chevaliers' (*Grandes chroniques de France*, fourteenth/fifteenth century. Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, Richelieu, Manuscrits Français 73, folio 386). *Wikimedia Commons*, 13 March 2011 <<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Adoubement1.jpg>>
 - 5 'Adoubement' (*Lancelot du Lac*, 1470. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS Français 112 (1), f. 62 v.). *Utpictura18*, 29 September, 2008 <<http://www.univ-montp3.fr/pictura/GenerateurNotice.php?numnotice=A6212>>
 - 6 'Serment de chevalier' [the Knight's Pledge] (fourteenth century; Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France. Direct source and full location not shown). Reproduced from Fabrice Mrugala, *Le Moyen-âge et l'Histoire médiévale*, 17 May, 2011 <<http://medieval.mrugala.net/Seigneurs%20et%20nobles/Serment%20de%20chevalier%20-%20big.jpg>>
 - 7 Allegorical knight from Guilelmus Peraldus, *Summa de virtutibus et vitiis* (1255–65; London, British Library, MS Harley 3244, f. 28). *Wikimedia Commons*, 1 September, 2010 <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Peraldus_Knight.jpg>

¹⁸ The complete manuscript is available from the University of Calgary's website: <<http://gawain.ucalgary.ca/>>.

- 8 Pentangle shield from ‘Religion Among the Laity’, *Medieval Literature and Material Culture*, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, n.d. <<http://sitemaker.umich.edu/religiousobjects/files/pentangle.gif>>
 ‘Gold pentagram/pentangle on red background’, *Wikimedia Commons*, 29 March, 2010 <Gold pentagram on red.png>
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- 11 Virgin Mary, *Livre d’heures provençal de René d’Anjou* (1459–60; Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS Latin 17332, folio number not shown). Oberlin, OH: Oberlin College and Conservatory, n.d. <<http://www.oberlin.edu/images/Art335/week11-0006.JPG>>
- 12 ‘King Arthur armed, carrying his red shield blazoned with the Virgin and Child [...]’ (1307–27; London: British Library, MS Royal 20 A.II. f.004r). Sharon Rains, ‘The Art of Illumination: Medieval Manuscripts, Calligraphy, Illuminated Letters’, n.d. *Pinterest* <<http://pinterest.com/pin/51932201926572412/>>
- 16 ‘La Vieille’ (edited detail) from Guillaume de Lorris and Jeun de Meun, *Roman de la Rose* (1350–60. Paris, Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève, MS 1126, fol. 90r). ‘Reading the Roman de la rose in Text and Image’, *MARGOT*, Waterloo, ON: University of Waterloo, 2013 <<http://margot.uwaterloo.ca/images/bsg/1126/090r.jpg>>
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- 17 Jehan de Grise and his workshop, miniature from *Roman d’Alexandre* (1338–44; Bodleian Library MS Bodl. 264). Oxford: Oxford University, Bodleian Library, n.d. <<http://image.ox.ac.uk/images/bodleian/ms.bodl.264/58r.jpg>>