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*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

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**Idealised chivalric knights -**

**Chaucer's Knight in the *General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* and Sir Gawain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.**

Chaucer's Knight, in the *General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*<sup>1</sup>, overawes the majority of readers to such an extent that he is thought to be seriously presented and deliberately idealised. Terry Jones's challenge to this reading is still, after fifteen years, not generally accepted<sup>2</sup>. Helen Cooper, Derek Pearsall, even Przemyslaw Mroczynski, have continued (throughout the eighties and early nineties) to designate Chaucer's Knight as ideal and idealised<sup>3</sup>. How is it that Chaucer's Knight has come to embody an ideal so convincingly that critics resist a reading based on the text, logical reasoning and fool-proof historical evidence? Has the Knight's ideal reputation become so unquestioned that any slur suggested seems to threaten the status not of the fictional character but of the ideal itself?

One way of arguing that Chaucer's Knight is not idealised but on the contrary subtly criticised by his author (my intention in this paper) is to compare him with another knight by a different author about whose idealisation there is no possible controversy - Sir Gawain - the hero of the

1 The text referred to throughout is : *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed., ed. Larry Benson (1987)(OUP 1988).

2 Terry Jones, *Chaucer's Knight : The Portrait of a Medieval Mercenary*, (London : Eyre Methuen, (1980) 1982).

3 Helen Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales* (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 28 ; Derek Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales* (London : Unwin Hymen, 1985) pp. 64-5 ; Przemyslaw Mroczynski "Chaucer's Knight and Some of his Fellow Fighters", *Genres, Themes and Images from the 14th to the 15th century*. The J.A. W. Bennett Memorial Lectures, Perugia 1986, ed. Piero Boitani et Anna Torti (Tubingen : Gunter Narr Verlag, 1988).

still anonymous text, probably contemporary to Chaucer's, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*<sup>4</sup>.

Distinct Genres - romance and reportage.

The main contrast between the two knights is that they figure in two distinct literary genres - one, Sir Gawain, the hero of an out and out romance, consciously fictional, the other, Chaucer's Knight, a nameless, but realistic character in the *General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*, portrayed in an account deliberately journalistic and supposedly factual, relayed by a comically uncreative reporter, i.e. Chaucer's mocking trope for himself - his dim-witted Narrator<sup>5</sup>. That Sir Gawain is consciously idealised is indisputable, for belonging to Arthurian romance he is part of an idealising genre that tells the stories of an idealising community. We understand from the omniscient, didactic, commentating, but decidedly outside-the-story narrator of *Sir Gawain*, that the fellowship of excellent knights of Arthur's Round Table exists expressly to invent, elaborate and fulfil the ideals of chivalry. The narrator of *Sir Gawain* writes in a tradition which he recognises as motivating his listeners or readers in this way. Pursuing excellence and discovering the best man and the best contender in the three main spheres of life, as soldier, as lover, as christian, is the purpose and goal of the Arthurian ethos, the aim of the jousts, trials and adventures of all the knights. The whole "Matter of Britain" in the literary works of the various countries which contributed to it takes for granted the idealising and ideal aspect of the tales of the Round Table<sup>6</sup>. King Arthur arbitrates, but the whole fellowship judges the continuous competition to achieve excellence according to ideals held in common.

As a youthful representative of this illustrious body, Sir Gawain is thus provided with the background, both ideological and social, and the appearance, trappings, adventures, luck, as well as, most importantly, the fallibility and vulnerability of the traditional Arthurian knight who has the reputation of the Round Table to uphold, and his own to make. His story turns on how after overall success in a dangerous adventure, he makes a

4 The text referred to throughout is ed. W. R. J. Barron, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, (Manchester and New York : Manchester University Press and Barnes and Noble, 1974)

5 The capital is used to stress the fully fictionalised nature of Chaucer's digetic speaker and to distinguish him from the narrator of *Sir Gawain*.

6 W. R. J. Barron, *English Medieval Romance* (London and New York : Longman, 1987) pp. 166-176

mistake which shames him into thinking he has failed the common ideals. But the fellowship only laughs and applauds, for compared to others, his misdeed was trifling, and Sir Gawain is judged to have come as near to embodying the ideal knight in his adventure as, in the circumstances, was humanly possible. The reader tends to agree with this verdict since the young Sir Gawain is almost unique in conciliating the fundamentally conflicting claims of soldier and lover and christian, his one mistake slight, excusable and endearingly human<sup>7</sup>.

Chaucer's Knight on the other hand, presented as existing in fact, enjoys the kind of credibility that is produced by historical realism. Indeed most critics seem to read him as actually, factually existing, like his battles, and he is not thought of as the figment of the imagination that he obviously is. He carries the label knight but, in the realistic mode, is not obliged as he would be in the mode of romance or alternatively in true historical narrative, to demonstrate how he earned the title. He appears, realistically, as a stranger, part of a Canterbury pilgrimage, a haphazard and socially promiscuous gathering. Chaucer's Knight's reputation is thus established realistically as it would be on such an occasion by telling, not showing : we hear much of his past but little of his present, much of his public career, almost nothing of his private life, neither his name, nor his background, nor his origins. How exactly he fulfilled the knightly ideals that he is said to have always loved is not stated, but we are told repeatedly that he embodies them and is widely recognized as doing so. His being 'worthy' is stressed in the first line of his portrait (then repeated fourfold) and in the second line we hear of the five main points of the chivalric code which he has always loved : "chivalrie, trouthe and honour, freedom and curtesie". He is summed up towards the end of his portrait as "a verray, parfit, gentil knight" so that at first reading, it hardly occurs to the reader to doubt or to wonder about an opinion which is given and repeated with such aplomb. The realistic mode imposes a realistic reaction, and we accept as fact what is factually presented in a social context. It seems only manners to defer to this superb reputation of an obvious social superior.

Yet, paradoxically, the realistic mode allows for far more imaginative and (dangerously) unconscious filling in than the fantasy mode. Imagining the marvellous delights us, but does not convince because we are aware of what we are doing, whereas imagining hypothetical reality, we assume we are producing credible, reasonable, convincing inferences, and

7 See W. R. J. Barron, *Trawthe and Treason : The sin of Gawain reconsidered*, (Manchester : Manchester University Press, 1980).

risk forgetting that we are dealing with fictions. So comparing the two knights we have to remember that the realism of the *General Prologue* is just as fictional as the fantasy of the *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* romance. It follows that we can harbour doubts as to how far if at all Chaucer, in his realistic reporter's portrait, really means to idealise his knight. Moreover, as the present author has abundantly argued in previous articles<sup>8</sup>, the flattering portrait can be thought to originate in the views of the portrayed, i.e. in the self-opinion of the Knight himself, rather than in those of the portrayer, Chaucer's comically uncreative reporter-narrator. Relayed through this Narrator in Double Reported or Free Indirect Speech the whole description of the Knight in Chaucer's *General Prologue* can be read as an extended piece of boastful self-projection.

Sir Gawain is a more traditional figure, indubitably closer than Chaucer's Knight to the ideal knight of the Arthurian tradition, yet precisely because of his traditional weaknesses and failings more spontaneously appealing as a fictional figure. His spiritual qualities, his inner worth, are not only told, but shown and explained in detail and subsequently tested. Moreover he wears them as the badges of the Round Table and his chosen ideals are proclaimed openly, indeed defiantly, in the symbol on his shield, where the pentangle (the five pointed star) is painted in gold. The five virtues symbolised by the five points of the star have five-fold ramifications, which permit myriad computations, but can be understood roughly to correspond to the five main points of the chivalric code beloved by Chaucer's Knight: chivalry, truth, honour, freedom and courtesy. We can examine the five points in relation to the two knights, both as private inner virtues and outward public manifestations, remembering that to medieval and christian mentalities, "outward signs of inward grace"<sup>9</sup> (see Ruth Morse in *Truth and Convention in the Middle*

8 See author's previous introductions to the Narrator in a) "Trust and Chaucer's Prioresse: the Secrets of her Success", b) "Chaucer's Clerk", and especially "Narrators in the opening of Chaucer's *General Prologue* and Byron's *Don Juan*", (in French "Les Narrateurs dans le début du *General Prologue* de Chaucer, et de *Don Juan* de Byron") in *Publications de l'Association des médiévistes anglicistes de l'enseignement supérieur (AMAES)*, a) n° 17, Paris 1992; b) *BAM* n° 48 (1994); c) n° 42 (1993).

9 The catechism formula stresses contemporary Catholic beliefs in the efficacy of the sacraments.

Ages<sup>10</sup>) were more convincing and meaningful than they are to us today, and that the light of christian virtue was supposed to shine<sup>11</sup>.

#### Courtesy

Sir Gawain's story, a christmas entertainment designed to please, is centered around the concept of courtesy, last on the list for Chaucer's Knight but arguably first in importance for Sir Gawain<sup>12</sup>. The purity of his senses and heart is stressed, and the young knight's most arduous testing is undergone at the hands of women. As an embodiment of pure courtesy Sir Gawain is thus presented as supremely attractive physically as well as spiritually. Youthful, dynamic, sensitive and modest, his treatment of others and especially of women is invariably courteous and amiable, however much he has to resist their allurements or repulsiveness.<sup>13</sup> As he embarks on his adventure he is beautifully, symbolically and effectively dressed and armed, very much looking the part of the ideal knight we are meant to admire and take pride in. Yet since he is alone, vulnerable, beset by dangers, we are also invited to share for the young knight the concern and sympathy aroused in the onlookers.

Chaucer's Knight in contrast is elderly, as we infer from the first and main part of his portrait which lengthily lists the invariably successful battles that lie behind him. His appearance, when we finally come to it, is decidedly unengaging. We are told peremptorily that he and his horse were "not gay", and informed that he was shabbily dressed and dirty: his outer garment of fustian stained with rust from his armour. Compared to the impression created by Sir Gawain, the true Arthurian knight in shining armour with a circlet of diamonds on his forehead, the beautiful young man that lovely ladies cannot help but pursue, the impression made by Chaucer's Knight is drab, dull, even repulsive. He may be showing his christian humility by going on the pilgrimage without bothering to change

10 Ruth Morse, *Truth and Convention in the Middle Ages*, (Cambridge, New York, Port Chester, Melbourne, Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

11 "Neither do men light a candle and put it under a bushel", Matthew, 5: 15.

12 W.R. J. Barron, *Trawthe and Treason*, p. 21. and D.S. Brewer, "Courtesy and the Gawain Poet", *Patterns of Love and Courtesy*, ed. John L. Lawlor (London: 1966) 54-85.

13 If the young wife of his host allures Sir Gawain by her beauty, the ugly, old but revered relation, later revealed as the evil Morgan le Fey, tests his courtesy by her repulsiveness.

out of his battle gear, but from one professing love of courtesy such behaviour seems rude and crude<sup>14</sup>.

The Knight's cavalry career, his commitment to "chevalrie", seems to have left him no time for "cortesie" or improving his manners through the frequenting of courtly ladies. Always speaking mildly *like* a maid is no substitute for never speaking mildly *to* a maid. Yet Chaucer's Knight omits any other mention of women; no lady accompanies him, not even in his thoughts and memories, not even the mother of his son. "Cortesie" in the form of socially acceptable interest in women (or the amorous dalliance so skillfully deployed by Sir Gawain), is conspicuous by its absence from the account of this so-called idealised Knight of Chaucer's. Chaucer's Knight leaves all that sort of thing to the Squire, his son, the gay young blade who accompanies him, just as he leaves all the polished weapons and bright armour in the keeping of his yeoman, who is armed from head to foot. The threeosome create a disturbing effect from the disparity of their appearance clashing with their obvious social cohesion. Since the knight is so clearly in charge, his authority though not his attractiveness is enhanced by comparison with his followers, and the three together can be thought of as strengthening the Knight's predominant characteristic: nothing more ideal than the power to intimidate<sup>15</sup>.

Now however much this dour, dull, dogged, if thought-to-be-worthy fighter would meet with the approval of the majority of latter-day Englishmen, marked as they are by Puritanism, Victorianism, and 20th century impatience with the niceties, it seems likely that Chaucer's 14th century contemporaries, steeped as *they* were in Arthurian romance, would have reacted differently. They could hardly have considered idealised a figure who seemed to ignore what to many was even more important than the chivalric knight's fighting skills, which any soldier, or gangster for that matter, is known to possess: in other words his neglect of courtesy, particularly courtesy to women, the distinctive hall-mark of Arthurian knights. Certainly *then* more distinctly than now, among some of Chaucer's audience at least, Chaucer's Knight must have aroused a very mitigated response, if not outright disapproval, for his lack of courtesy and its attendant glamour.

14 Muriel Bowden, *Commentary on the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*, 2nd ed. (London: 1969) p. 50.

15 See Jones, op. cit. p. 211 and note 155.

### Freedom

To other problems raised by Chaucer's Knight's unattractive appearance, we will return later, but will next examine "freedom" in the sense we are given in the Riverside edition, i.e. generosity of spirit or goodwill to others. After the list of battles that Chaucer's Knight has fought and in which he won such a sovereign reputation, we learn that:

"And though that he were worthy, he was wys,

And of his port as meek as is a mayde.

He nevere yet no villeyne ne seyde

in all his lyf unto no maner wight."

(which leads us into the punch-line as above:

He was a verry, parfit gentil knyght.")

Examined closely, these assertions are surprising and seem at odds with Chaucer's Knight's fighting career. As Terry Jones remarks, never hurting anybody in words does not imply never hurting anybody by deeds, and the absence of rude words can evoke a passionless killer even more sinister than a raging one<sup>16</sup>. Moreover, spoken "vileynyes" or deliberate insults were part of the rituals of knightly single combat. Hard words between enemies were the traditional means of public declaration of hostilities, and ensured that opponents got some measure of a fair fight out in the open, rather than treacherous dealings by underhand means. So never speaking any "vileynye" to anybody, not even enemies, is worrying rather than reassuring as to Chaucer's Knight's understanding of generosity of spirit and fair play. Furthermore freedom can be understood in the sense of frankness, the moral courage to come out openly with unwelcome news.

Sir Gawain shows generosity of spirit and a sense of fair play more convincingly when he speaks freely, but boldly in answer to the Green Knight's provocations, so insulting that the entire Round Table is roused to fury. King Arthur throws back some hard-hitting comments, prepared to take up the challenge himself, when Sir Gawain intervenes to suggest he take his place. Although discreetly worded, Sir Gawain's intervention can hardly be thought of as like a meek maid's. As well as volunteering for a patent suicide mission, Sir Gawain is in effect reproving his king and recalling him to his duty, daring (unlike the meek maid by definition) to criticise authority.

If we take "freedom" to mean lordly largesse and gift-giving, neither of the two Knights is shown distributing it very freely, but receiving gifts is mentioned in both cases. Sir Gawain is able to refuse and accept gifts

16 See Jones, op. cit., p. 114.

with a graciousness denied to Chaucer's Knight simply because he is visibly rich as well as publicly meritorious. There is by contrast something pathetic about Chaucer's Knight being so apparently bereft of funds that he is the only one of the whole pilgrimage to show an interest in the free dinner prize for the best story competition proposed by the host<sup>17</sup>. Why, we might ask, with all those glorious campaigns behind him, is he not richer?

#### Honour

When it comes to honour, the gap between public forms and private meanings becomes more marked than in the case of courtesy and liberality, which are as important in their public manifestation as in their private intentions. In the case of honour the inner meaning takes precedence over the outward forms, the exact attitudes of those honouring and those being honoured become more complex and difficult to ascertain, and both Chaucer's Knight and Sir Gawain enjoy honours that turn out to be deceptive or even dishonourable. For as long as honours come from one's own side, they are pledges at least of loyalty, but when the honours come from the enemy, problems arise. Indeed the further away from home the knights ride out, the easier the honours seem to come, but in the eyes of the home society they count for less and less. Chaucer's Knight "ever honoured for his worthyness" gets to sit in the place of honour at table only in Eastern Europe, in Prussia, presumably with the Teutonic Knights, who however worthy they might appear in England were hated by a local population they had "converted" by pillage with fire and sword<sup>18</sup>. The only one of his commanders Chaucer's Knight honours with a title is the lord of Palatye, who turns out to be a Turk and heathen, and fighting another heathen. The implication that Chaucer's Knight has fought, at least once, as a mercenary is textually inescapable.

Sir Gawain, whose initial seat of honour as Arthur's cousin next to Queen Guinevere is already exceptional, is similarly honoured to excess when furthest from home, at the beautiful castle that he comes to in his wandering. "And mony proud mon ther presed, that prynce to honour"(l. 830). These proud people actually kneel down before him to afford him a suitable welcome and then accompany him into the castle where he is embraced by the Lord and lavishly entertained, and where the Lady honours him with exceedingly personal attention. For this reception is later

17 See *Riverside*, p. 36, lines 796-801, p. 37, l. 890.

18 See Mroczewski, *op. cit.*

proved to be a trap, the Lord of the castle is revealed as Sir Gawain's enemy in disguise who with the aid of his beautiful wife plots his guest's downfall. In both cases public honours are shown to be deceptive and liable to make the recipients look foolish and feel humiliated.

As to the private sense of honour as self-esteem and commitment to unshakeable loyalties, Sir Gawain proves he has it to a punctilious degree (the guide's advice to run while he can to avoid combat is received excessively coldly if courteously by the young knight). But Chaucer's Knight, like a real person, remains opaque on this point, although fighting for the heathen and not being ashamed to advertise the fact suggests that his private sense of honour is accommodating to say the least. Perhaps, given his age, his notion of honour has been cut down by experience to the limited, cynical one of the professional<sup>19</sup> rather than the ideal one of the patriot. As long as he is considered worthy and worth employing by others and visibly honoured by rewards, he rests content with a conscience that circumstances can conveniently stretch. But the materially shabby image he offers suggests that even as a mercenary he may not have been very successful, particularly when we notice his obsessive interest in the public appearances and showy accoutrements of even minor characters in his tale like Lyurgus and Emetrius<sup>20</sup>.

#### Trouthe

If honour is difficult to discern, truth is complex even to define. Presumably the first sense to give it in the late 14th century context is the Christian faith believed by adepts to be divinely revealed. How do the two Knights compare as Christians? Chaucer's Knight we are told "foughten for oure faith at Tramyssene" which has a fine Crusading ring to it, until in the next line we learn that this was done in "lystes thries" i.e. in tournaments and not in real battles, and reflect that Tramyssene is in Algeria, nowhere near the Holy Sepulchre. This mention of "oure faith" is the last of only three allusions to the Christian faith in the whole of the Knight's portrait, the first being the indication of his battlegrounds "as wel in cristendom as in hethenesse", the second a reminder of the number of

19 See author's treatment of this subject in "Conscience, Catholicism and Codes of Conduct in Waugh's *The Sword of Honour Trilogy*", *Genre et littérature dans le monde anglophone*, Actes du Colloquede l'Université du Maine, Le Mans, Novembre 1988, Collection Etudes Anglophones.

20 That Chaucer himself does not share his Knight's fascination for these pretentious and useless soldiers, is hinted at by the etymology of the root syllables of their names.

his raids in Russia. None show much commitment to the christian cause or prove real devotion or piety. Just as he leaves the attractive dress to his son, Chaucer's Knight leaves the wearing of medals to his yeoman who sports a medal of St Christopher (oddly, since the patron saint of the huntsman the yeoman is supposed to be St Hubert, and St Christopher the patron of unarmed travellers). In contrast to Chaucer's Knight's nonchalance towards signalling his faith, even on pilgrimage, Sir Gawain manifests an edifying attitude to his religious duties, more in keeping with the traditions of the seekers of the Holy Grail. The figure of the Virgin figures discreetly on the inside of his shield, and we frequently witness Sir Gawain praying and practising religious ritual with sincere devotion if with a certain naivety<sup>21</sup>. A touch of humour saves this spectacle from appearing pious showing off, for even in this area the Divine Powers are not above playing amusing tricks: as when Sir Gawain's triple sign of the cross is followed by the apparition as if by magic of the beautiful castle which he thinks his refuge but where he will be sorely tried by dire if delicious temptations.

If modesty as well as courtesy distinguish the Arthurian knightly ethic from any other - of Greeks, Romans, Samourai, Mafiosi - Chaucer's Knight is again outdone by Sir Gawain. In the first place Sir Gawain is shown failing and sinning, and not invariably winning; in the second place he is heard speaking and acting modestly as regards himself and not giving the impression of boasting: lastly and most importantly, he is shown going to confession voluntarily and suffering in his conscience involuntarily when he realises that he has, even slightly, slipped into sin. Above all, he strives to be truthful in speech, not only by keeping his promises, but by admitting unpleasant truths about himself. Chaucer's Knight, on the other hand, is presented as so worthy and so successful that he ends up sounding too good to be true as the "verray, parfit, gentle knight" ; someone moreover about whom words are used and facts recounted in a way that is revealed as contradictory and irresponsible when examined closely. Like a curriculum vitae or a clever advertisement, the portrait of Chaucer's Knight does initially create a good impression, but one that seems to evaporate on close scrutiny and not to hold true. The use of the overwhelming positive statement at the beginning of Chaucer's Knight's portrait - that he had always loved chivalry, truth and honour, freedom and courtesy, is so sublime a claim that it silences objections and muffles judgement, but what follows, instead of bearing it out, actually contradicts

21 Sir Gawain's two confessions are discussed by Barron and other critics.

it. Sir Gawain speaks the truth more convincingly when he protests he has always hated treachery "... and ferde haf been euer / Of trecherye and untrawthe..." (2382-3), a morally more restrained claim, nearer to ordinary experience. In the moral sphere, negative injunctions are easier to comprehend and put into effect than positive ones, as the Ten Commandments themselves seem to prove.

Chaucer's Knight's mention of "degree" early in the portrait passage shows how much rank, military and social, matters to him, as does his sovereign reputation or "prys". But is the author not allowing us room and clues to enable us to criticise this wordliness ? The high point of the Knight's "honours", the sitting at the bord in the foremost place, evokes the gospel passage about the Pharisees seeking the best places in the temple to advertise their own glory rather than the Lord's<sup>22</sup>. Chaucer's Knight's glorified reputation suggests indeed that we might be listening to something worse than mere boasting, to actual lying, and being told something that never is borne out by facts, never *does* come true, like politician's election promises. Could Chaucer's Knight be even worse than a mercenary, be unconsciously or consciously inventing an impressive career for himself, but be "really" a false knight, a brigand in disguise ?

### Chivalry

The point that chivalry has in common with any other fighting ethics which merit respect - Greeks, Romans, Samourai, not Mafiosi, - is that it incorporates violence into some sort of altruistic framework. Loyalty to comrades at the lowest level, ideals of social order at the highest are supposed to guide and civilise basic aggressive instincts by controlling them in the spiritual sense. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* the hero is clearly shown fighting for his king and comrades, by taking on his terrifying challenger with the magic powers, as well as fighting on a moral level with his own temptations. But his truly chivalric attitudes are born out even by his mistake, when he is lured into betraying his own ideal courage by refusing to betray either host or hostess. By making so much of his secret failing as to be overwhelmed with shame, the hero demonstrates his extreme sensitivity to the standards which he sets himself, like the princess in the fairy-tale who felt the pea through twenty mattresses. Gawain is truly chivalrous not because he is perfect but because he is a perfectionist and because he extends a purely altruistic care even to creatures who will not repay him with rewards or flattery. That Sir

Gawain's feelings for others are not necessarily high-flown but can be attractively homely as well as ideal as suggested by his relationship with his horse, who comes in for a good deal of attention, shares in the glamorous appearance as well as in the dangerous circumstances of the knightly adventurer, and bears the appealing name, Gringalet.

Chaucer's Knight has no named animal or retainer by him, as if, in a business-like way, only functions and not personalities mattered to him. Furthermore, by never revealing his own name, he acts not like the good knights but like the bad knights of the Arthurian tradition. His anonymity together with his and his horse's shabby appearance can be put down to a deplorable lack of pride in his rank, rather than to christian humility or eagerness to get onto the pilgrimage without delay. And his excuse for his rust-stained surcoat will not do. If he has come back from the wars, why is his armour rusty? Flexible coats of mail and all armour gets polished by active service, it becomes "burnished", "shine(s) in use" in the words of Tennyson<sup>23</sup>, and rusts only when it is lying around like its idle owner. Indeed, whether or not this is the case in fact, rusting armour is a traditional trope for the idle, irresponsible, unideal knight who ought to be ashamed of himself but isn't, for not fighting for his country when he is needed. The traditional call to arms in knightly action, dating to even earlier than the romances, is the epic call to true warriors to take down the rusty weapons from the wall and make them shine with use. Red rust on his armour is assimilated to the red blush of shame which should suffuse his cheeks when the true knight realises that he is, by idleness or cowardice, failing his knightly duty.

This comparison between the consciously idealised knight, Sir Gawain, who feels burning shame for a trifling misdeed, and the apparently idealised, realistic knight of the *General Prologue* who feels no shame at all in spreading misrepresentations or possibly even lies about himself, persuades me to think that Chaucer is not presenting an idealised knight to us, but a realistic knight who puts himself across as sufficiently reminiscent of true knights as to pass for one to the undemanding. Thus Chaucer's realistic knight who is far from embodying the ideals he is said to represent is a travesty of the ideal knight, a sad comment on what happens to ideals in real life. Other knights of Chaucer's who would not be outdone in authenticity by Sir Gawain are (certainly) Troilus, and (possibly) the nobly forgiving knights of the Franklin's Tale. But

23 Tennyson, *Ulysses*, 23.

Chaucer's Knight in the *General Prologue* finally seems more akin to Diomedes than to Troilus, as do his followers, the Squire and the Yeoman.

Through close study we become aware of certain verbal echoes of the Arthurian romances in Chaucer's text. The humble Narrator's pride in using the word "fellowship" (26) of the miscellaneous and frequently repulsive pilgrims reminds us of the very different, elite "fellowship" (651) of the Round Table (the word in *Sir Gawain* being used less to designate the corporate body than the quality of the bonds holding the members together, solidarity between friends rather than mere party manners between acquaintances). The Host who suggests games and competitions before a grand feast is a parodic echo of King Arthur and his refusal to eat before a game or adventure has been undertaken. Chaucer's Knight is content to "sing for his supper" under the authority of this ill-born inn-keeper<sup>24</sup> and designated as the first to begin the story competition by the inglorious method of drawing straws; not for him the admirable initiatives of the soldier first to the fray.

On every count Chaucer's Knight is revealed as unideal; as a soldier he seems to be motivated by a naked drive to survive, and to win by whatever means; as a lover, he does not begin to figure, although he allows his son to travesty the ideals of courtesy with his sex-mad antics; as a christian, he behaves in the deplorably chaotic fashion of a large proportion of the historical crusaders, and leaves the practice of religion to the devices of his yeoman. As to his rust-stained clothes, they are, in every way, a disgrace. Chaucer's Knight, far from being an idealised portrayal of the best, is a tongue-in-cheek satire of what, in real-life terms, is the best they can get.

As for Sir Gawain, who ends by changing his pentangle badge of virtue for the green girdle of shame or (paradoxically) of honour, his whole story turns on his learning the hard lesson of human fallibility and serves as a reminder to the Round Table and to humanity at large, that ideals are authentic only in so far as it is plainly admitted that they can never be fully attained<sup>25</sup>.

24 The word play on tabard / bâlard would not escape those of Chaucer's audience who were bilingual in English and French.

25 Wendy Clein, *Concepts of Chivalry in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Norman Oldshorn, Pilgrim Books, 1987) pp. 6-7.