‘Who is Gawain? Referring to the Hero in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*’

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This paper seeks to ask once more a question that has already been addressed many times in scholarship on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: who is Gawain? The answers that have been given to this question over the past decades seem paradoxically obvious and straightforward – Gawain is Arthur's nephew, a knight of the Round Table, and the paragon of chivalry. At the same time, some answers are most complex, and seem to open to further questions on the hero's identity: who is the English Gawain as opposed to the French Gauvain? What does his behaviour in Camelot, at the Castle of Hautdesert and at the Green Chapel say about him? Has he failed the beheading game or does the reaction of Arthur's court at the end of the story suggest that there is something more to the hero's adventure? This paper proposes a new approach to Gawain's identity based on a detailed analysis of the text, and more specifically of the names and noun phrases used to refer to the hero in this romance.

The text of *Sir Gawain* is, of course, already at the heart of a vast body of scholarship and has been acknowledged many times to be of particular interest for its rich vocabulary and its archaic style. Building on such a rich scholarship, I argue that there is more meaning to uncover from the text when looking at the distribution of words in the poem. Focusing on the distribution of words used to describe, or to refer to, the hero, and more specifically on the references to him as 'Gawain', it becomes possible to uncover a meaningful pattern as far as the hero's identity is concerned. Throughout the poem, Gawain is called 'Gawain' 71 times, the most common lexical term to designate him in the text. He is also referred to as 'knyght' 28 times and as 'Sir Gawain' 23 times. The romance's rich vocabulary, however, also applies to the hero, and a myriad of nouns, adjectives, and combinations of them is

used to refer to Gawain. In total, the poem contains more than 50 different noun phrases that refer to Gawain. For example, the poet uses the noun 'knyght' alone 28 times but also refers to the hero as 'gode knyght', 'knyght erraunt', 'comloker knyght', 'gentyle knyght', 'hende knyght', etc.

In the following, I will be considering together and without distinction the references that the narrator makes to Gawain, and those that the other characters make within the story. Both the narrator's and the other characters' words should ultimately be considered to represent the poet's choice of words in the romance. Approaching the text this way, however, just like approaching it only from the perspective of the references to the hero as 'Gawain', can only begin to reveal further insights into Gawain's identity. It is, therefore, only part of a larger study on the use of names and noun patterns in *Sir Gawain* that is presented here. Of course, the different ways in which the characters and the narrator perceive Gawain are meaningful, and would deserve more attention when it comes to the hero's identity. This paper identifies three episodes in which Gawain is most often called by his name – the first Fitt, the establishment of the game with Bertilak at Hautdesert, and Gawain's journey to the Green Chapel – and proposes to understand these episodes, together with their settings, as crucial steps in the development of the hero's identity as a knight.

Looking at the use and distribution of Gawain's name throughout the poem points to further issues and questions: 'When is Gawain called "Gawain"?' And 'What image of Gawain is presented to the poem's audience?'. Gawain's identity, I argue, is presented as mutable and changeable depending on the geographical and social environments in which he finds himself during his quest. The great halls at Arthur's and at Bertilak's

courts both represent festive and crowded spaces that contrast with the private atmosphere of Gawain's bedroom in Hautdesert and with the lonely environment of the woods. As such, the social environment that the courts present contributes to Gawain's identity, as the naming pattern applied to the hero also seems to suggest.

It is first necessary to identify when Gawain is called 'Gawain' in the romance. When looking at the distribution of the name throughout the text, three main episodes stand out in which the hero is mostly named 'Gawain'. Among the 71 occurrences of the name 'Gawain' in the text, 14 can be found in the first Fitt, which represents the first 500 lines of the poem, 13 can be found in the last 200 lines of the second Fitt, in the scene in which Bertilak establishes the rules of the game with Gawain, and 15 of these occurrences can be found in the first 300 lines of the fourth Fitt, in which the hero travels to the Green Chapel and receives the first return blow. The remaining 29 occurrences of the name 'Gawain' are distributed less evenly throughout the remaining two thirds of the poem. The distribution of the hero's name in the text thus shows that it is mostly when the hero evolves in a courtly setting that he is called by his name, and he is most often called by his name when he is in such a courtly environment. These are two different yet complementary processes in the construction of Gawain's identity. Moreover, these three scenes suggest that the development of Gawain's identity relies on the depiction of space and of movement in the romance.

The emphasis on these two issues – space and movement – in the poem have already been put forward in scholarship. As William F. Woods notes, 'the action of the poem moves from culture to nature, from court to forest,

and conversely from the outer, courtly Gawain to the impulsive inner man.'[1] There is, indeed, a clear parallel, even a mirroring effect in the poem between, on the one hand, geographical and chronological movement, represented by Gawain's quest to the Green Chapel and the importance of the passing of time in the text and, on the other hand, the evolution of Gawain's behaviour throughout the story. In addition, I argue that the hero's movements between the court and the forest parallel the image of him that is presented to the audience. When he evolves at court, the hero is most often referred to as 'Gawain' rather than being associated with specific identity traits such as his role as a knight, his worthiness, or his courtliness, among other traits. Therefore, when facing the text of *Sir Gawain*, the accumulation of occurrences of the name 'Gawain' at these specific times in the narrative reinforces the juxtaposition between his identity and the courtly setting in which he finds himself.

The first of these three sequences corresponds to the second half of the first Fitt, after the Green Knight has irrupted into Arthur's hall and has exposed his game to the Knights of the Round Table. Gawain, who had only been briefly introduced as 'gode Gawan' (l. 109), interrupts Arthur as he is just about to chop the Green Knight's head:

> Gawan, that sate bi the quene,
> To the kyng he can enclyne:
> 'I beseche now with sawes sene
> This melly mot be myne.' (ll. 339-42)

[1] William F. Woods, 'Nature and the Inner Man in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *The Chaucer Review* 36.3 (2002), 209-227, p. 209.

He enters the story, and the game, with a short and efficient intervention that sets the story in motion and establishes its main concern: *Sir Gawain* is not the story of Arthur defending his court and the knights of his Round Table, but rather Gawain's coming-of-age story outside the comfort of the young Camelot. The remaining of the first Fitt consists in the group of knights agreeing – without much hesitation – to Gawain's request, and to Gawain beheading the Green Knight:

> Ryche togeder con roun,
> And sythen thay redden aile same
> To ryd the kyng wyth croun,
> And gif Gawan the game. (ll. 362-5)
> […]
> Gawan gos co the gome, with giserne inhonde,
> And he baldly hym bydes, he bayst never the helder.
> […]
> Gauan gripped to his ax and gederes hit on hyght (ll. 375-6; 421)

This scene, and the Fitt, conclude with the king and the knights acknowledging what just happened to them at court, while yet partly dismissing with a laugh the daunting perspective of the following Christmas:

> The kyng and Gawen thare
> At that grene thay laghe and grenne;
> Yet breved was hit ful bare
> A mervayl among tho menne. (ll. 463-6)

At each of these crucial steps, the hero is referred to as 'Gawain'. In other words, each of these actions is associated with Gawain as 'Gawain' and

therefore contributes to establishing his social identity. As Daniel R. Pike recently pointed out, 'Gawain is "Gawain" only as long as the Arthurian social order agrees that he maintains these standards.'[2] Outside the romance, I argue, in addition, that Gawain is 'Gawain' only as long as he is perceived as such by the audience. It is by establishing and enforcing Gawain's identity at court within the poem that the text allows for the acknowledgment of Gawain's social identity.

After this introductory episode, the hero is then increasingly called 'Gawain' again once he has entered the castle of Hautdesert and has been welcomed by its lord, Bertilak, and by the people of the court. And just like the Christmas feast that took place at Arthur's court the previous year provided closure for the first sequence analysed above, the Christmas feast to which Gawain participates when he arrives at Hautdesert opens up the poem's second main episode at court. Gawain introduces himself to Bertilak's court as 'Gawain himself', which implies that his name is already widely recognised beyond Camelot:

> And hit was Wawen hymself that in that won syttes,
> Comen to that Krystmasse, as case hym then lymped. (ll. 906-7)

Several references to the hero as 'Gawain' follow his introduction to Bertilak's court. Interestingly, these references to Gawain in the courtly environment of the feast repeatedly point to his interactions with the ladies and lords of the court:

> Gawan and the gay burde togeder thay seten

[2] Daniel R. Pike, 'Gawain's Identity in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', in *Agrégation anglaise, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight et The Green Knight*, ed. by Sandra Gorgievski and Martine Yvernault (Paris: Ellipses, 2023).

Even inmyddes, as the messe merely come (ll. 1003-4)

[…]

Bot yet I woe that Wawen and the wale burde

Such comfort of her compaynye caghten togeder (ll. 1010-11)

[…]

Gawan gef hym god day, the godmon hym lachches,

Ledes hym to his awen chambre, the chymne bysyde (ll. 1029-30)

The occurrences of Gawain's name in the episode of the Christmas feast taking place at Bertilak's court complement the references to the hero's name at Arthur's court in that they also contribute to the development of his social identity and of his public image. In the coming-of-age process that *Sir Gawain* displays, the hero can only truly become 'Gawain' through his behaviour in a courtly society.

This second sequence also parallels the first sequence mentioned above by showing Gawain engaging in another exchange game, this time with Bertilak:

'Bi God,' quoth Gawayn the gode, 'I grant thertylle,

And that yow lyse for to layke, lef hit me thynkes.' (ll. 1110-11)

Of course, both the hero and the audience will soon learn that Gawain has in fact engaged in two exchange games with the same man, as is hinted at by the narrator in the last wheel of the second Fitt:

To bed yet er thay yede,

Recorded covenauntes ofte;

The olde lorde of that leude

Cowthe wel halde layk alofte. (ll. 1122-5)

The allusion, in these lines, to Bertilak's ability to host games predicts the later revelation of the Green Knight's identity at the Green Chapel.

Throughout his stay at Hautdesert, and in the well-known bedroom scenes in which Gawain is courted by the lady of the castle, the hero is only occasionally referred to as 'Gawain'. From the moment when he steps out of the castle gate until the Green Knight has struck the second blow, however, the hero is mostly referred to as 'Gawain' again. This third sequence is not set in a courtly setting in the same way as the previous scenes were. Gawain leaves Hautdesert with a servant and rides to the Green Chapel to find the Green Knight at the agreed time for the return blow:

> The burne blessed hym bilyve, and the bredes passed;
> Prayses the porter bifore the prynce kneled,
> Gefhym God and goud day, that Gawayn he save (ll. 2071-3)

But even though this scene does not take place at court, it is still set in an environment that is directly linked with the two games in which Gawain has engaged. While he does not realise it yet, the hero is about to solve the two challenges that he agreed on earlier: the exchange of blows with the Green Knight and the exchange of gifts with Bertilak.

Once he has reached the Green Chapel, the hero introduces himself in a way that reminds both of his very first mention in the story and of the way in which he presents himself at Hautdesert:

> 'Who stightles in this sted, me steven to holde?
> For now is gode Gawayn goande ryght here.' (ll. 2213-14)

The hero's identity is reinforced through the many references to him as 'Gawain' in the Green Chapel episode. Most decisive in the making of the hero's identity among these references are those to the Green Knight's first blow:

> Then the gome in the grene graythed hym swythe,
> Gederes up hys grymme tole, Gawayn to smyte (ll. 2259-60)
> […]
> Bot Gawayn on that giserne glyfte hym bysyde,
> As hit com glydande adoun on glode hym to schende,
> And schranke a lytel with the schulderes for the scharp yrne. (ll. 2265-7)

As the Green Knight's axe is brought up in the air above Gawain's neck and starts falling, the hero flinches. This reaction causes his opponent to question the hero's identity: 'Thou art not Gawayn' (l. 2270). This use of the hero's name echoes the lady's earlier famous reprimand to Gawain for not staying faithful to his reputation: 'Bot that ye be Gawan, hit gos not in mynde' (l. 1293). In both cases, the hero's name is used to deny him his identity. According to the lady and to the Green Knight, the hero does not correspond to the ideal type that the name 'Gawain' represents. Such a marked use of Gawain's name is not directly used to refer to him, but it nevertheless contributes to the making of his identity in the romance as it allows the audience to question the nature and meaning of Gawain's name.

Upon the Green Knight's second blow, Gawain remains motionless. This time, however, the opponent's feint provokes the hero's anger and

impatience, maybe suggesting in part a lack of maturity and of progress since he left Arthur's court the previous year:

> Gawayn graythely hit bydes and glent with no membre,
> Bot stode stylle as the ston other a stubbe auther
> That ratheled is in roche grounde with rotes a hundreth. (ll. 2290-94)
> […]
> Gawayn ful gryndelly with greme thenne sayde:
> 'Wy, thresch on, thou thro mon, thou thretes to Ionge;
> I hope that thi herr arwe wyth thyn awen selven.' (ll. 2299-2301)

This reference to the hero as he begins insulting the Green Knight is one of the last references to him as 'Gawain' in the romance.

The last three occurrences of the hero's name support the pattern identified above, as they associate the hero with a movement from the forest to the court and with the social environment of Camelot. After he has declined Bertilak's invitation to Hautdesert, Gawain mounts his steed and leaves:

> Gawayn on blonk ful bene
> To the kynges burgh buskes bolde,
> Ant he knyght in the enker grene
> Whiderwarde-so-ever he wolde.
> Wylde ways in the worlde Wowen now rydes
> On Gryngolet, that the grace hade geten of his lyve. (ll. 2475-80)

When he reaches Arthur's court, the hero is referred to one last time as 'gode Gawayn' in a way that mirrors the first mention of his name in the text:

> Ther wakned wele in that wone when wyst the grete

That gode Gawayn was commen; gayn hit hym thoght. (ll. 2490-1)

Like in the scene of the Christmas dinner in Hautdesert, this last occurrence also places the emphasis on Gawain's social identity by referring to him as 'Gawain' when he interacts with others. By replicating the earlier collocation 'gode Gawayn' in the romance's last scene, the text invites the audience to consider the hero's progress throughout the story. The knights' positive reaction to Gawain's return to Camelot suggests that he has successfully completed his quest for identity and is truly worthy of the epithet 'gode Gawayn'.

In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the naming of the hero seems to follow a specific pattern that parallels his quest for identity. As the three episodes analysed above suggest, Gawain is called 'Gawain' when he has to face the reality of knighthood and the consequences of his actions. More importantly, Gawain is repeatedly called 'Gawain' when he has to expose his real self to others publicly. When the poet calls Gawain by his name, he emphasises the challenges that are posed to the hero's social identity: when he takes on a challenge at Arthur's court, when he takes part in a game at Bertilak's court, and when he faces the consequences of these quests at the Green Chapel. From the perspective of the use of noun phrases and names in the poem, Gawain's name represents his public image, the image that is put forward, and also challenged, at court. There is, however, still more to uncover on the development of Gawain's identity in *Sir Gawain*. Looking at the use of the other nouns and adjectives attributed to the hero in the poem would contribute to a better understanding of how his identity is described and perceived in the text.