

**Gawain at the crossroads,  
between ancient tradition and Christian faith  
– syncretism, mystery and pedagogy**

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[The title of this paper was initially communicated in French, but the presentation was eventually in English, therefore its title is now "Gawain at the Crossroads, Between Ancient Tradition and Christian Faith – Syncretism, Mystery and Pedagogy".

Part of the conference on "Tradition and Innovation in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*" organized by Colette Stévanovitch and the University of Lorraine, this publication, here presented in its shortened, pre-print version, is a homage reference to the anonymous Gawain poet and the matter he drew on to create his work.]

Unlike *Patience*, *Cleanness* or *Pearl*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*'s subject matter is not overtly religious and especially not solely Christian. It brings about material from the past in a story telling mode which would appeal to the audience of the time even more than it does to us. Clearly, the medieval reliance on orality rather than on the written word provides an insight in the culture of orality which characterized Celtic antiquity onwards, until the Medieval and even the Renaissance periods. In the fourteenth century, people were still used to hearing stories, not only sermons, and huge amounts of Celtic mythological references were still in

circulation at the time of the Gawain poet, readily available as filtered through Arthurian matter.

One of the qualities of Celtic mythology is that it largely relies on the confusion between real life, "historical" heroes and the exaggeration of their deeds to the point of making them larger than life. The Gawain poet chose to develop one of these episodes in his rich work of art, together with powerful Christian elements, as was then customary. The result provides a multilayered syncretic story which encapsulates items from both traditions – Celtic and Christian.

Without much doubt, the Gawain poet was very probably not only a learned man, but also, as Leo Carruthers argued: "a religious man, indeed a professional cleric<sup>1</sup> [whose duties] would be to preach regularly".<sup>2</sup> This assumption will be useful to interpret the purpose of writing which, as I will suggest, was to produce a didactic art form, not only to provide a delightful entertainment but also to aid the pedagogical process at work in all missions of evangelization or catechism. The move is very subtle, however, and does not appear at first sight. In order to illustrate my point, I will first deal with the Celtic substrate, from the point of view of the literary genre, which helps understand how this matter from the past is rendered in the poem. Then, I will lay emphasis on the authorial figure and the notion of syncretism at work in the text in order to develop my understanding of the purpose of writing itself.

## 1 A CELTIC LAY

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<sup>1</sup> On the meaning of 'cleric', see M.T. Clanchy, *From Memory to the Written Record, England 1066-1307*, 2013, p. 228.

<sup>2</sup> Leo Carruthers, "Religion, Magic and Symbol in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight", in *Q/W/E/R/T/Y n°4 Arts*, 1994, p. 13.

Thirty lines after the beginning of the poem, the Gawain poet announces its genre – a lay that he heard "in town":

If ye wyllysten this laye bot a little quile  
I schal telle hit astit, as I in toun herde,  
                    with tonge;  
As hit is stad and stoken  
In stori stif and stronge,  
With lel leteres loken,  
In londe so has benlonge. (p. 22, l. 30-36)

[So listen a little while to my tale if you will  
And I'll tell it as it's told in the town where it trips from  
                    the tongue;  
and as it has been inked  
in stories bold and strong,  
where loyal letters linked  
have lasted loud and strong.] (p. 23, l. 30-36)<sup>3</sup>

Let us pause a little and analyze this passage. First and foremost, a lay is a chant, a song. The word comes from the Celtic *laid*, meaning song<sup>4</sup> to be told or sung and listened. Although the characteristics of the lay evolved over time and singing along the music of the harp gave way to a more developed narrative some core ingredients remained which can be

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<sup>3</sup> Middle English references and translations are from Simon Armitage's edition of *SGGK*, Norton, 2007.

<sup>4</sup>*Lais de Marie de France*, traduits et annotés par Laurence Harf-Lancner, 1990, p.13. *The Middle English Compendium* (online) has: "(a) A short narrative poem of love, adventure, etc., to be sung and accompanied on instruments, especially the harp; ~ of Britoun, a Breton lay; also, a tale; (b) a song, lyric; (c) the song of a bird". The term is rather frequently used, for instance in the Middle English Breton Lays of *Sir Ofeo* and *Le Freine*, but also in Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale*: "Thise Britons in hir dayes/ Of diuerse auentures maden layes / Whiche layes with hir instrumentz they songe / Or elles reddem hem for hir plesaunce" (c.1395) Chaucer *CT.Fkl.* (Manly-Rickert) F.710,712, in *MEC*, online, accessed 11/11/24).

used to define the genre. In their edition of *The Middle English Breton Lays*, Laskaya and Salisbury define the topics that are common to lays: "war, woe, joy, happiness, treachery, guile, adventure, bawdiness, ribaldry, the fairy world and most of all, love"(1995, p. 5). In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* the poet signals the genre and makes King Arthur command narrative components. From line 90 to 106, elements are called for, that are to be found throughout the poem. Thus, Arthur's proleptic comments fulfill the function of an expository scene in theatre. By uttering what he wishes to see, Arthur announces the types of events that are going to unfold in the poem: "sum aventurus thing an uncouth tale, [...] sum mayn mervayle, that he might trawe, [...] alders, [...] armes, [and] other aventurus, [...]"<sup>5</sup> but also knights, life challenges and combats are envisaged together with, the poet goes on, banquets, joy and festivities<sup>6</sup>. Later, the tale also meets the expectations of bawdiness, treachery and the fairy world, of course.

Listeners may be pleased; this lay has much in store to satisfy them. Besides, the fact that it was heard "in town" enhances its popularity and makes it appear trendy for people living in a rural area. Being a lay, it comes from ancient times and its transcription secured in truthful writing has been around for a long time, the poet says: "stad and stoken [...] / With lel leteres loken, / In londe so has benlonge"(l. 33- 36). Furthermore, the final position of these lines at the end of the bob and wheel stanza

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<sup>5</sup>Arthur simply refused to eat "[...] until a story was told: / some far-fetched yarn or outrageous fable, / the tallest of tales, yet one ringing with truth / like the action-packed epics of men-at-arms" (l. 92-95). The translation adds a slightly humorous lustre that does not exist in the original text which only states Arthur's desire for the precise elements he wants to hear. He first wants to hear, not eat. A parallel is thus made between the food banquet and the cultural one, equally aiming to replenish the monarch.

<sup>6</sup> See Agnès Blandeau, "Make we mery' at 'this hyghe fest'. The feasting episodes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*", in S. Gogievsky and M. Yvernault (Ed.), *Ellipses*, 2023, pp. 75-90.

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makes the age-old aspect of the poem all the more apparent and the use of the present perfect in the last line emphasizes the link between past and present. Therefore, the whole passage acknowledges the passage from oral culture to writing. These textual details are markers of the presence of an ancient tradition in the poem. Of course, magical elements and the Arthurian matter are signs of this antique Celtic presence in themselves too.<sup>7</sup>

To conclude on the passage of the poem introducing its genre, what we have is a poet who acknowledges the passage of time and the transition from oral tradition to the written word, thereby signaling that he is drawing on old cultural features to produce his work. The notion of the passage of time stresses the dichotomy between old and new, between orality and the written word, and between ancient faith and Christian faith. The poet, a man of his time, as well as his work, appear as the perfect intermediaries, presenting features of both worlds. This syncretism is highly significant in the poem, all the more so because of the status of the author as a man of God.

## 2 THE ANONYMOUS AUTHOR

On his journey to discover the language and landscape of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in the documentary film broadcast by BBC Four in 2018,<sup>8</sup> Simon Armitage states that the roots of the poem are situated in

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<sup>7</sup> See Céline Savatier-Lahondès, "Aspects magiques, racines celtiques dans *Sire Gauvain et le Chevalier Vert*" in S. Gogievsky and M. Yvernault (Ed.), Ellipses, 2023, pp. 27-43.

<sup>8</sup> Armitage Simon, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Produced and directed by Tim Dunn, BBC Four documentary, 2018.

North Staffordshire, in the District of Staffordshire Moorlands. The dialect the Gawain poet uses has been argued to be local to this area.<sup>9</sup> There, in the Parish of Leek, there is a Cistercian Monastery known as Dieu-La-Cres Abbey, within the grounds of Abbey Farm, founded in 1214. Armitage ventures to say saying that the Gawain poet might have been a monk there: "He was scholarly, and very clever. Besides, the monks were probably the only educated people in the area", Armitage argues (2018, '42mn).<sup>10</sup> As Leo Carruthers stresses, there is pleasure in the guessing game about the author's identity, something which he would have found pleasurable himself, seeing scholars and students trying to find out who he was.<sup>11</sup>

In the very text of the poem, however, a character attracts our attention, who is only mentioned once, without any other indication but his name – Bishop Bawdewyn (l. 112). The presence of a man of God at the banquet table is interesting, and the name of Bawdewyn too. Sir Bawdewyn is a knight in later works such as Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*. He is "the sone of Grassien, the godson of kynge Ban" in the English prose *Merlin*.<sup>12</sup> In the *Brut, or the Chronicles of England*, he is "Ser Bawdewyn Radyngton, knyzt"<sup>13</sup> (c.1388). The only trace I was able to we could find of

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<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x6pzj1u> (accessed 11/11/24).

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00kvbny> (accessed 11/11/24).

<sup>9</sup> Many scholars contend that the poem was actually created in Cheshire, the liminal area in the marches of England where the Wirral peninsula is situated. The use of other dialects could have served the alliterative style. (See, for example, Ad Putter).

<sup>10</sup> The Gawain poet was most certainly not a simple monk and was very likely affiliated to an influent family from the nobility: "Whoever his patron was, that the author was a religious man, indeed a professional cleric and very probably a chaplain in a noble household can hardly be doubted" (Carruthers, *op. cit.*, p. 13).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Merlin, or the early history of King Arthur*, a prose romance, edited by Henry B. Wheatley, chapter x (1450-1460).

<sup>13</sup> C.1388, vol. 2, capitulum ccxl, jousts in Smithfield.

a religious man called by this name is in the *Chronicle of Iohn Hardyng* again, later in date, in which you find "Bawdewyn, archbishop & primate of Cauntorbury & of England".<sup>14</sup> Thus, although it was rather common to have a cleric at the banquet table in Monmouth's *Chronicles*, for example, the religious character "abof bigines the table" (l.112), sitting at the head of the table, at the Christmas banquet together with Arthur and his court creates an intriguing presence. What if the poet himself had considered making an amused appearance in his own poem, much like Alfred Hitchcock used to do in each of his movies – a brief, almost unnoticed presence, yet enough to appear as a signature.

Pleasant considerations apart, however, the character who embodies the Christian presence to the full is Sir Gawain himself. He stands in between ancient and new traditions, the perfect illustration of syncretism. He is Morgan Le Fay's nephew, son of her sister Morgause. He is part of this somewhat strange family, composed of fairy beings. The Green Knight alludes to Gawain's family's background towards the end of the poem, in the revelation scene, when he says (p. 184, l. 2463-2467) that the "auncian lady" who lives with him in the castle of Hautdesert is in fact his aunt, Morgan, Arthur's half-sister. Yet, although his roots are otherworldly,<sup>15</sup> Gawain is, as Armitage underlines: "full of faith"; he is "a devout Christian, wearing the image of the Virgin Mary on his shield and the pentangle [...] in his world, faith and pagan beliefs exist side by side" (BBC documentary, 2018). Much like most people at the time of the Gawain poet, "his world is full of superstitions, witchcraft, magic and folklore" (*ibid.*).

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<sup>14</sup> John Harding (1378-1465?). His chronicle was completed in 1457, Harleian MS, The. C. xxxvii.

<sup>15</sup> Morgan (Morgue) is called "Morgne the Goddess" (l. 2452).

Thus, the poet appears as an heir of the Celtic tradition and as a professional Christian cleric as well, which makes him act as a "passeur" of culture. According to Armitage there is no clear religious moral message in the poem, yet behind the subtle writing "game" served by skilled narrative techniques, one can sense that there is a definite writing purpose.

### 3 PURPOSE OF WRITING, PEDAGOGY

In her monograph entitled *God and the Gawain-poet*, Cecilia Hatt argues that: "In exhorting readers to recognize and respond to the narrative of divine gift, he appears as an energetic Christian poet and a humane and compassionate observer".<sup>16</sup> As a "compassionate observer", endowed with humane qualities, the poet considers his congregation and their beliefs. He writes for them. In *Patience*, the poet drives home the necessity of the Christian virtue of patience. In *Cleanness*, there, again, another message is clearly conveyed, describing the virtues of cleanliness of body and of married love. *Sire Gawain and the Green Knight* is not like these two examples. However, the choice to tackle the subject of pagan culture also exhorts the audience to "recognize and respond to the narrative of divine gift" as Hatt argues.<sup>17</sup>

The poet uses and reshapes traditional narratives and mixes this substrate to the Christian one, to the point that even characters like the Green Knight himself melt into the Christian tradition, up to a certain point. Although he is a fairy being, he uses "the Christian vocabulary of the

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<sup>16</sup> Hatt, Cecilia, *God and the Gawain-poet*, Boydell and Brewer, 2015, back cover.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*



penance sacrament" as Olivier Simonin underlines in his essay entitled "Sire Gauvain et la catégorisation des vices" (Ellipses, 2023, p. 65). In the poem, the knight says: "Thou art confessed so clene, beknownen of thy mysses, and has the penaunce apert of the point of mynegge" [By confessing your failings you are free from fault / and have openly paid penance at the point of my axe.] (l. 2391-2392). These lines convey a clear example of how the poet manages to consider both sides, by having a fairy being use Christian lexicon ("confessed", "clene", "penaunce"), together with the warlike imagery belonging to knighthood ("the point of mynegge", my blade). The benefit of confession and penance is "apert", that is to say plain, evident, obvious, as convincing and clear as the sharpness of a blade. Thus, this subtle narrative technique intertwines traditions and drags the audience into considering the repairing attitude of the acknowledgement of one's sins, no matter what tradition you belonged to.

Thus, the writer, this "compassionate observer" granted his listeners what they appreciated and he told them what could not be trusted. Gawain trusted the sash, out of fear – he was afraid of being killed – so he relied on superstition, this green girdle supposed to protect him. Yet, this choice led him astray from the true path of Christ. By being untrue to his host, he was untrue to Christ, incarnate Truth. The substantive "Untrawthe" [dishonesty] (l. 2383, l. 2509) which appears twice at the end of the poem, bears the specific meaning of disobedience to God, it is a sin. Therefore, Gawain is presented as the perfect example of the admirable devout hero who, because of his own education and culture could not help resort to superstition and who found himself tricked by it, resulting in the unbearable position of being untrue to God. Thus, if no clear moral

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message is to be drawn from this narrative, the anonymous author nonetheless gives the advice not to trust old superstitions too much if you are to be a true believer and a good Christian.

In conclusion, summoning the presence of an absence – the anonymous author – is by essence paradoxical. It can only be achieved indirectly, by agitating the textual fabric in order to make it speak, to unveil part of its mystery, as far as possible and reveal its significance. I have attempted to provide a reading focusing on the transitional aspect lying at the heart of the poem. Gawain walks the roads of time, between old and new. He himself embodies this passage, being both a champion of Christ and the Virgin Mary and a member of Morgan le Fay's family circle. He stands at the crossroads; he is disorientated – which shows quite prominently in the film adaptation – not knowing exactly which road to take. The poet seems to subtly guide him, though, with no strict injunction, like a father softly talking his children into choosing the voice of reason. Therefore, the metaphor of the road encapsulates Gawain's journey as much as the audience's. Listeners are pedagogically invited to identify to Gawain and make new joys of past times.