

## The Geographical Setting of the Quest in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*<sup>1</sup>

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On New Year's Eve a green knight enters Camelot and astonishes Arthur and his knights by his offer of a beheading game. Gawain accepts the challenge and beheads the knight. The Green Knight then picks up his head and tells Gawain to meet him for the return blow a year later at a place called "the Green Chapel". According to him, many people will be able to direct Gawain to this place:

þe knyȝt of þe grene chapel men knowen me mony;  
Forþi me for to fynde if þou fraysteȝ, fayleȝ þou neuer.<sup>2</sup> (454-55)

"The Knight of the Green Chapel I am known to many,  
so if to find me thou endeavor, thou'lt fail not to do so."<sup>3</sup>

In fact, the Green Chapel will not prove so easy to find. Gawain sets off the day after All Saints' Day and reaches his goal on New Year's Day. He travels for two months, riding through wild places amid hardships and dangers of all kinds. It is not until he has come less than two miles from the object of his quest that he can find anyone able to point him in the right direction or even aware of the existence of the chapel. The poet summarises this long journey in a few stanzas, while most of the poem is devoted to Gawain's stay at Bertilak's castle between Christmas and New Year's Day. It is the journey itself, however, that we will focus on here.

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While the exact location of the Green Chapel is necessarily unknown, since finding it is part of the challenge, the poem does mention a few place names and suggests at least an approximate location.

The opening lines set the story in a precisely defined geographical context. After alluding to the siege of Troy, the poet names various countries founded by the descendants of Aeneas: Rome by Romulus, Tuscany by Tirius, Lombardy by Langobard and Britain by Brutus. It is against this backdrop of a Britain carefully located in relation to the rest of Europe, beyond the English Channel, *fer ouer þe French flod* (13), that the narrative begins. In the third stanza comes an unexpected shift into mythical space: *þis kyng lay at Camylot vpon Krystmasse* (37) "This king was at Camelot for Christmas". The first episode of the poem, the description of the New Year's celebrations interrupted by the Green Knight's challenge, takes place at Arthur's court, in that ill-located, unreal space where the irrational and the marvellous are commonplace. The poem was written at the end of the 14th century, and the mere mention of Camelot was enough to conjure up a long tradition of romances in which magic and the supernatural play a leading role, a mythical space of forests in which knights errant wander, of fords defended by fierce enemies, of castles offering

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was published as "La géographie de la quête dans *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*", in *La géographie dans les textes narratifs médiévaux*, ed. D. Buschinger and W. Spiewok, coll. Wodan n° 62, Greifswald, 1996, 153-61.

<sup>2</sup> The edition used is *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon, 2nd ed. revised by N. Davis, Oxford, 1967.

<sup>3</sup> Translations are by J.R.R. Tolkien, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, and Sir Orfeo*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1975.

“adventures”. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* King Arthur, as was his custom, is waiting for such an adventure before sitting down to dinner. Nothing could be more expected, more traditional than the atmosphere of fabulous events associated with the Arthurian space. Less traditional is the introductory stanza which places Arthur’s kingdom within a realistic geographical setting.

The first two toponyms mentioned in the poem, Camelot (37) and Logres (691), are well-known Arthurian names that have resisted unequivocal identification with real places. Logres is Arthur’s kingdom. Its exact location varies in romances: the whole of England, England south of the Humber, the London region.... The position of Camelot, the seat of Arthur’s court, is even more uncertain. The name could be a corruption of Avalon and have been confused with Caerleon, which according to Geoffrey of Monmouth was Arthur’s capital<sup>4</sup>. Given the itinerary followed by Gawain in the poem, the most appropriate location for Camelot would be in South Wales or South-West England, since crossing Wales to reach the Wirral would represent a not inconsiderable diversion for someone coming from the south-east of the country. However, one should not give too much weight to this argument, since after all Gawain has no idea where he is going.

The first part of Gawain’s journey takes place within the Arthurian world, in the kingdom of Logres, where he rides alone, as befits a knight errant:

Now rideþ þis renk þurþ þe ryalme of Logres,  
 Sir Gauan, on Godeþ halue, þaþ hym no gomen þoþt.  
 Oft leudleþ alone he lengeþ on nyþteþ  
 Per he fonde noþt hym byfore þe fare þat he lyked.  
 Hade he no fere bot his fole bi frytheþ and douneþ,  
 Ne no gome bot God bi gate wyth to karp. (691-96)

“Now he rides thus arrayed through the realm of Logres,  
 Sir Gawain in God’s care, though no game no he found it.  
 Oft forlorn and alone he lodged of a night  
 where he found not afforded him such fare as pleased him.  
 He had no friend but his horse in the forests and hills,  
 no man on his march to commune with but God.”

Suddenly, without it being clear how he got there, Gawain finds himself in North Wales, out of the Arthurian world, confronted with a real space:

Til þat he neþed ful neghe into þe Norþe Waleþ.  
 Alle þe iles of Anglesay on lyft half he haldeþ,  
 And fareþ ouer þe fordeþ by þe forlondeþ,  
 Ouer at þe Holy Hede, til he hade eft bonk  
 In þe wyldrenesse of Wyrle; wonde þer bot lyte  
 Þat auþer God oþer gome wyth goud hert louied. (697-702)

“till anon he drew near unto Northern Wales.  
 All the isles of Angelsey he held on his left,  
 and over the fords he fared by the flats near the sea,  
 and then over by the Holy Head to high land again  
 in the wilderness of Wirral: there wandered but few  
 who with goodwill regarded either God or mortal.”

The poet clarifies the topography with an accumulation of names—four in five lines—that refer to actual places: North Wales, the Isles of Anglesey, the Holy Head, the

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<sup>4</sup> Roger Sherman Loomis, *Arthurian Tradition and Chrétien de Troyes*, New-York: Columbia University Press, 1949, p. 480-81. Another favoured etymology is Camulodonum, which was an important city in Roman Britain. Sites such as London, Winchester, Cadbury Castle, have also been suggested.

Wirral. Then references to identified places come to an abrupt end. All geographical data, with the exception of the name of Camelot, are concentrated in a dozen lines (691-701)<sup>5</sup>.

If the location of the first two landmarks, Camelot and Logres, is uncertain, there is no such hesitation as regards the rest of the journey. Gawain's route can be followed on a map. After weeks of travelling through the kingdom of Logres he has reached North Wales. He heads east, keeping to his left the Isles of Anglesey (Anglesey proper, Holy Island, Puffin Island, and a few islets near Menai Bridge), crosses the River Dee<sup>6</sup> and finds himself in the Wirral, a peninsula in the northwest of England lying between the rivers Dee and Mersey and adjacent to Wales. Only one point remains unresolved: at what "Holy Head" he fords the Dee. Holyhead, a port in the island of Anglesey?<sup>7</sup> West Kirby?<sup>8</sup> Or, more interestingly, perhaps Holywell, where in the 7<sup>th</sup> century Saint Winifred was beheaded by Prince **Cardoc** of Hawarden, to whom she had refused herself. A spring gushed out where her head fell, forming a stream that flows into the Dee. This holy well was an important centre of pilgrimage in the Middle Ages. Saint Winifred, who had been resurrected by her uncle Saint Beunon, had a white mark around her neck all her life. This legend recalls the mock-beheadings in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.<sup>9</sup>

A second point of uncertainty is, of course, the location of the Green Chapel itself. There is no shortage of ingenious suggestions for its identification with various spots in the counties of Staffordshire or Cumberland<sup>10</sup>. Yet nothing in the text indicates

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<sup>5</sup> Some critics have interpreted this sudden accumulation of place names as an indication of the author's geographical origin. See for instance Burrow: "The blend of realistic and romantic geography in this itinerary may seem somewhat arbitrary; but it is coherent enough if we look at it from the point of view of the author and his original audience—if, that is, we imagine ourselves to be in Cheshire or thereabouts. We should see Gawain coming towards us through Arthurian England, entering our country by way of the familiar coast-road from North Wales, fording the Dee and crossing the notorious Wirral, before riding off again into the countries of romance." (J. A. Burrow, *A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965, p. 51). However that may be, we shall see that the poet had more weighty reasons for this unexpected shift in geography.

<sup>6</sup> P. L. Heyworth ("Sir Gawain's Crossing of Dee", *Medium Ævum*, 41 (1972), 125-27) considers that *þe fordez by þe forlondez* (699) refers to the fording of the Dee. This implies that *ouer at þe Holy Hede* functions as a variation of l. 699 and that only one river is forded.

<sup>7</sup> It should not be, since Gawain has left the island of Anglesey behind him and in any case it does not touch the Wirral. However, J. Eadie ("Sir Gawain's Travels in North Wales", *Review of English Studies*, n.s. 34 (1983), 191-95) defends this identification and considers that Gawain first passes through this island before reaching the Wirral by an unspecified route. He argues that there is another similar silence in the poem, since the author does not specify how Gawain passes from Logres to Wales. However, the journey from Logres to Wales is different in nature and the comparison cannot hold.

<sup>8</sup> J. McN. Dodgson ("Sir Gawain's Arrival in Wirral", in *Early English and Norse Studies Presented to Hugh Smith*, ed. A. Brown & P. Foote, London, 1963, 19-25) relies on arguments such as the phonetic similarity between the Welsh name of Anglesey's Holyhead (Caer Gybi) and forms of the name West Kirby. He suggests that the reader, reading "Holyhead", would translate "Caer Gyby" and interpret it as "Kirby".

<sup>9</sup> R. W. Chambers, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, lines 697-702", *Modern Language Review* 2 (1907), 167. David Lowery used this legend in his film *The Green Knight* (2021).

<sup>10</sup> The landscape in which the chapel stands is rugged, with hills and rocks. Mabel Day points out that the nearest mountainous area to the Wirral is in Staffordshire, where a cave at Wetton Mill recalls the poet's description of the Green Chapel (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. I. Gollancz, with introductory essays by Mabel Day and Mary S. Serjeantson, London: Early English Text Society, 1940, p. xx). The idea was taken up and developed, with photographs, by R. E. Kaske ("Gawain's Green Chapel and the Cave at Wetton Mill", in *Medieval and Folklore Studies: Essays in Honor of*

that Gawain leaves the Wirral, in Cheshire<sup>11</sup>, to venture into either of these counties. The Wirral is the last name mentioned by the poet, and the accumulation of geographical indications at this point in the text suggests that this is the end of the journey. It would make little sense to give precise information about the middle part of the itinerary only—unless of course the silence that follows the Wirral meant that Gawain is now moving into the unknown, into some wild, uncharted area: but this cannot apply to Staffordshire, Cumberland or any of the neighbouring counties. Fourteenth-century England was not a virgin land in which only a few areas had been explored, but a mapped, administered kingdom whose properties and inhabitants had been recorded in the Domesday Book as early as 1086.

Until we have proof to the contrary, we will therefore accept that Gawain remains in the Wirral<sup>12</sup>. Indeed the Wirral is a fitting place for the challenge Gawain has to face<sup>13</sup>. In the 14th century it was a wild and dangerous region to which could fittingly be applied the words of the poem, *wonde þer bot lyte / þat auþer God oper gome wyth goud hert louied* (701-02) “there wandered but few who with goodwill regarded either God or mortal”. It was covered by an immense forest which served as a refuge for bandits, so much so that in 1376 the citizens of Chester requested it to be razed to the ground<sup>14</sup>. The forest in the midst of which Bertilak’s castle stands bears a striking resemblance to what the Wirral must have been like. With its tangled vegetation, it would make an ideal hiding place for a band of robbers, and Gawain would be justified in feeling some mistrust towards the lord who lives in such a setting:

...a forest ful dep, þat ferly watȝ wylde,  
 Hiȝe hilleȝ on vche halue, and holtwodeȝ vnder  
 Of hore okeȝ ful hoge a hundreth togeder;  
 Þe hasel and þe haȝborne were harled al samen,  
 With roȝe raged mosse rayled anywhere,  
 Wyth mony bryddeȝ vnblyþe vpon bare twyges,  
 Þat pitosly þer piped for pine of þe colde (741-747)

“...a forest that was deep and fearsomely wild,  
 with high hills at each hand, and hoar woods beneath  
 of huge aged oaks by the hundred together;  
 the hazel and the hawthorn were huddled and tangled  
 with rough ragged moss around them trailing,  
 with many birds bleakly on the bare twigs sitting  
 that piteously piped there for pain of the cold.”

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*Francis Lee Utley*, ed. J. Mandel and B. A. Rosenberg, New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1970, 111-21). Elliott prefers another cave in Staffordshire, known as Ludchurch (R.W.V. Elliott, *The Gawain Country*, University of Leeds, 1984). Madden believes that Bertilak’s castle is in Cumberland, in the middle of Inglewood Forest, a traditional site for Arthurian adventures, and that the Green Chapel is a certain “Chapel of the Greene” a short distance away (*Syr Gawayne, A Collection of Ancient Romance-Poems*, ed. F. Madden, The Bannatyne Club, London, 1839).

<sup>11</sup> Until the 1972 Local Government Act.

<sup>12</sup> This is the position of W. McColly, “*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a Romance à clef”, *Chaucer Review*, 23 (1988-89), 78-92, p. 79.

<sup>13</sup> For studies of the landscape of the Wirral see Gillian Rudd, “‘The Wilderness of Wirral’ in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*”, *Arthuriana* 23 (2013), 52–65, and Francis K. H. So, “The Benign but Bleak ‘Wyl dreneſse’”, (*Medieval and Early Modern English Studies* 24 (2016), 20–35.

<sup>14</sup> Henry L. Savage, “A Note on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 700-2”, *Modern Language Notes* 46 (1931), 455-57.

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Gawain thus sets out from a mythical, imaginary place, Camelot, and reaches a genuine English region, the Wirral, at the end of a journey that takes him successively through the fabulous kingdom of Logres and very real Wales. Arthur's kingdom is like a parenthesis within the real world that surrounds it on all sides. Somewhere between the English Channel and North Wales, the kingdom of Logres seems fragile and insubstantial. The Arthurian knight, imbued with chivalric values, steps out of this mythical space into reality as Gawain emerges from the kingdom of Logres into North Wales. The shock for the reader/listener at this point is not unlike that experienced by the film-goer who discovers Lancelot with his hands on a police car, being patted down by a very modern-looking policeman in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.

The passage from one world to another reflects Gawain's experience as he comes to grips with a reality to which Arthur's court, beardless children as they are (280), had remained blandly alien. In the Wirral Gawain goes through a dual experience. He fights against fabulous creatures, dragons, trolls and giants, against formidable animals such as bulls, bears and boars, but he also undergoes the bodily, biological sensation of cold in a winter landscape described in minute detail. The shift into unromantic reality happens when the poet moves on from a list of the foes encountered by Gawain to his need for God's help in facing physical tortures in a hostile natural environment that is worse than any enemy. Indeed, as Gawain will find out, a human being, unlike a hero of romance, is a weak creature who needs to rely on God's help.

In this realistic world lives a burly, mature, bearded lord whose physical appearance contrasts with the beardless adolescents of Arthur's court, Gawain included:

Gawayn glyzt on þe gome þat godly hym gret,  
And þuȝt hit a bolde burne þat þe burȝ aȝte,  
A hoge haþel for þe noneȝ, and of hyghe eldee;  
Brode, bryȝt, watȝ his berde, and al beuer-hwed,  
Sturne, stif on þe stryppen on stalworth schonkeȝ (842-846)

"Gawain gazed at the good man who had greeted him kindly,  
and he thought bold and big was the baron of the castle,  
very large and long, and his life at the prime:  
broad and bright was his beard, and all beaver-hued,  
stern, strong in his stance upon stalwart legs"

As in real life, this man hunts game, hinds and does, a boar, a fox, to feed his household or safeguard farmers' hens, careful at the same time to preserve the herds in his "park"<sup>15</sup> like a good forester. He carves the kill according to rule and rewards the hounds that raised the game. Arthur too occasionally goes hunting in romances, but this typical pastime of the nobility is never described in such realistic detail in relation to him or his court. As in real life also, the gates of Bertilak's castle are under the responsibility of a porter who checks with his master before allowing a traveller in, whereas anybody could ride into Camelot unchallenged as the Green Knight did.

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<sup>15</sup> See Michael W. Twomey's, "How Green Was the Green Knight? Forest Ecology at Hautdesert", *Arthurian Literature* 30 (2013), 27–53, and Ann M. Martinez, "Bertilak's Green Vision", *Arthuriana* 26 (2016), 114–29.

Reality is what Gawain has to face. This is an experience unknown to Arthurian knights. In the world of romance a knight is confronted with stereotyped adventures, repeated identically from one romance to the next. Fights against giants or dangerous animals, a test of self-control before a beautiful woman who offers herself to him—the challenges that Gawain encounters at the beginning of his quest make up the everyday life of the knight errant. After two centuries of romances, you'd have to be as new as Perceval not to know how to behave in such circumstances. The test in which he will fail is different—different because it does not take place within the accepted framework of the rules of chivalry. Though Gawain is not aware of it, it is a confrontation between chivalric values and reality. Within the Arthurian universe Gawain had always behaved like an ideal knight<sup>16</sup>, courteous, valiant, invariably victorious, bearing on his shield the pentangle as a symbol of perfection. He goes through fights so casually that the poet does not even bother to detail them (715-25). But in the world of reality, where a hero is not always victorious, where he can die, where he is cold, hungry and even afraid, Gawain succumbs to temptation during a most trivial test, so trivial that he does not recognise it as a test at all: the offer of a magic girdle supposed to make him invulnerable—the offer of life—which the rules of a game forbid him to accept. In romance a knight's word is binding whatever the circumstances<sup>17</sup>, but in real life no one would dream of sacrificing their life to obey the rules of a game. Gawain, plunged into reality for the first time in his life, thinks he can take liberties with such rules in a case of *force majeure*. He thereby demonstrates that chivalric values have no place in the real world.<sup>18</sup>

At the beginning of the poem, Arthur's court is described as a society that has reached perfection; but it is the perfection of a closed, self-sufficient world that forges its own rules. In this protected environment, only chivalric values prevail. Some people may reject or ignore them, but they are still assessed against them, so that the presence of a few wild men or nefarious knights, quickly reduced to size, does not shake the certainties of the Arthurian world. Gawain's adventure is of a different order. It challenges the ideal of this society and exposes its limits.

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<sup>16</sup> In this poem, of course. Elsewhere in the Arthurian tradition Gawain can be portrayed in a much more negative light.

<sup>17</sup> As in the traditional theme of the king being asked for a boon which he grants without knowing what it entails.

<sup>18</sup> This twofold point of view sheds light on the question of the validity of his confession to the priest, in which the girdle is not mentioned. Assessed against the code of behaviour that rules the world of Arthurian romances Gawain's behaviour is faulty, but in the real world it is so natural that nobody could hold it against him. This has been a debated question. Some critics consider that Gawain's fault was so slight that no confession was necessary (W.O. Evans, "The Case for Sir Gawain Re-opened", *Modern Language Review*, 68 (1973), 721-33; M. Foley, "Gawain's Two Confessions Reconsidered", *Chaucer Review*, 9 (1974-75), 73-79; T. Hunt, "Gawain's Fault and the Moral Perspectives of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight", *Trivium*, 10 (1975), 1-18; Setsuko Nakao, "Sir Gawain's Confession Reconsidered—a Catholic View", *Studies in English Literature*, 52 (1976), p. 3-25; T. D. Hill, "Gawain's Jesting Lie : Towards an Interpretation of the Confessional Scene in Gawain and the Green Knight", *Studia Neophilologica*, 52 (1980), 279-86). Others see in it a sign of Gawain's moral decay (J. A. Burrow, "The Two Confession Scenes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*", *Modern Philology*, 57 (1959-60); R. H. Green, "Gawain's Shield and the Quest for Perfection", *English Literary History*, 29 (1962), 121-39).

Reality first intrudes into Arthur's court with the arrival of the Green Knight. With the green colour of his hair and horse, the sprig of holly in his hand, the embroidery of butterflies and birds on his clothes, and a huge green beard that is compared to a bush (161-186), the Green Knight appears as a manifestation of nature, contrasting with the overly artificial world of chivalry.

Nature, as Gawain will find out, is his enemy. His journey takes place in the midst of a wilderness that is systematically hostile: animals, monstrous creatures, the very cold of winter, all conspire against the courtly knight (713-32). The castle of Bertilak, in which he takes refuge, is only in appearance a protection against the attacks of nature. They continue there in another form, because the castle is an extension of nature<sup>19</sup>. Built in the middle of the forest, it welcomes it within its walls:

...he (= Gawain) watȝ war in þe wod of a won in a mote,  
 Abof a launde, on a lawe, loken vnder boȝeȝ  
 Of mony borelych bole aboute bi þe diches :  
 A castel þe comlokest þat euer knyȝt aȝte,  
 Pyched on a prayere, a park al aboute,  
 With a pyked palays pyned ful þik,  
 Þat vmbeteȝe mony tre mo þen two myle (764-70).

"a mansion he marked within a moat in the forest,  
 on a low mound above a lawn, laced under the branches  
 of many a burly bole round about by the ditches:  
 the castle most comely that ever a king possessed  
 placed amid a pleasance with a park all about it,  
 within a palisade of pointed pales set closely  
 that took its turn round the trees for two miles or more."

Its owner does not have to contend with the hostility of the natural world. When he leaves his castle to roam through the woods he is not attacked by bears or wild boars as Gawain was: he is the one who hunts and kills<sup>20</sup>. He does not listen to the pitiful piping of small birds in the cold: he gives the crows their fee (1355). It is fitting that this character's second domain should be the Green Chapel, a building in name only, built and decorated by the hands of nature (2170-84).

The reality with which Gawain finds himself confronted is that of nature, in every sense of the word: not only an outside world in which the cold of winter makes him painfully aware of bodily discomforts, but also on the internal level his own human nature, which will equally evade his control. Both, in different ways, stand against civilisation as represented by Camelot and its code of behaviour. Beyond the more obvious attacks of the cold, which he can withstand, the real world holds less overt dangers in store for Gawain. Fear will also be part of his experience, not to mention, on a more pleasurable note, sexual desire.

Far from the civilisation represented by Arthur's court, in this castle in the middle of the woods, divested of his armour and even of his clothes, Gawain finds himself confronted with human nature stripped of the veneer of civilisation. The temptation represented by the lady's courtly love-talk appeals strongly to his sexual instinct (1762), for he is lying naked in bed and she sitting next to him in a state of seductive half-dress (1740-1741) as they are debating together. Gawain can steel

<sup>19</sup> See Colette Stévanovitch, "Les châteaux dans *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*", in *Château et société castrale au Moyen âge : actes du colloque des 7-9 mars 1997*, [Rambures], dir. Jean-Marc Pastré, Rouen : Publications de l'Université de Rouen, 1998, 319-332.

<sup>20</sup> This contrast is pointed out by Michael George, "Gawain's Struggle with Ecology: Attitudes toward the Natural World in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*", *Journal of Ecology* 2 (2010), 30-44.

himself against this particular temptation. It is a different human instinct, the instinct for self-preservation, that will be the cause of his downfall when he keeps the green girdle to save his life. His failure in the test obliges us to conclude that the ideal of chivalry is not suited to such a fallible creature as man is, since even the best of knights is incapable of applying its rules in every situation.

Gawain's return to Arthur's court is not a return to the values of chivalry. He brings back with him from his expedition outside the Arthurian world an element of reality, the green girdle he wears as a reminder of his guilt. With a beginning and an end, a material utility, having the colour of leaves and grass, working as a reminder of human fallibility of behaviour and vulnerability of body, the girdle is anchored in reality, unlike the pentangle. It is a symbol of imperfection, because it is both the occasion and the reminder of the fault committed, but also because of its very shape. This strip of cloth, which forms an open, finite geometric figure, is what becomes of the endless knot of the pentangle when it is broken at one point and unravelled<sup>21</sup>. It replaces the pentangle as Gawain's emblem and is adopted by Arthur's entire court as an acknowledgement of the imperfection inherent in human nature.

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The ideal embodied by the knights of the Round Table is the stuff of romance, set in a fabulous past. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century it was felt to be doubly anachronistic in a society whose attitude had become more realistic, not to say mercantile. Knights did not spend their time rescuing damsels in distress or embarking on the quest for the Holy Grail, if they had ever done so. They waged war as a profession. The knight who figures among the pilgrims in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, presented as the model of the type, could well be a mercenary.<sup>22</sup> Set against the reality of the age, the Arthurian world is a utopia.

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was written at a time when, after a long flowering of romances, the chivalric ideal they proposed was being questioned. The *Queste del Saint Graal* (1225-1230) had already depicted the very best of Arthur's knights, Lancelot and Gawain, as sinners unworthy of laying eyes upon the sacred vessel. Gawain himself lost every feature of a courtly knight in the Prose *Tristan* (c. 1230 and c. 1240). A poet unfamiliar with the aristocratic way of life rewrote the romantic story of *Sir Landeval* as *Sir Launfal* (end 14<sup>th</sup> c.), tinging it with a mercantile bias that would appeal to a new audience. And so on... The Arthurian courtly ideal, always a literary artefact, was more and more becoming a thing of the past.

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* offers a nuanced answer to the ongoing debate. Though its hero fails, his failure does not call into question the chivalric ideal as such, but it does push it outside the real world into the realm of legend, utopia, the improbable—of literature, in short.

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<sup>21</sup> See Colette Stévanovitch, "Cycle et rupture dans *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*", in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight : Essays and Studies*, ed. A. Crépin et C. Stévanovitch. Publications de l'AMAES n° 19, 1994, 5-23.

<sup>22</sup> See Terry Jones, *Chaucer's Knight: The Portrait of a Medieval Mercenary*, 1980. On real and ideal chivalry see Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, Ch. 4 "The Idea of Chivalry", London: Edward Arnold, 1924, p. 56-65.



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