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THE DUAL PORTRAYAL OF THE CHARACTER OF SIR GAWAIN IN MIDDLE ENGLISH NARRATIVES¹

Abstract

Arthurian legend is one most powerful and influential story of the Middle Ages. None other tale of the medieval times has retained such an immense popularity throughout the centuries. Despite the importance of King Arthur himself, there is yet another member of the Round Table whose exploits inspired the English audience even more than the fabled ruler's. The popularity of Sir Gawain seems to be a uniquely English phenomenon. Often disregarded or even despised in the French tales, Sir Gawain retained almost infallible admiration and interest on the British Isles, inspiring such great masterpieces as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Especially the late Middle Ages witnessed a most remarkable discrepancy in the literary portrayal of King Arthur's nephew. This paper strives to present the dual evolution of the character of Sir Gawain in the medieval literature, on the basis of a comparative analysis of various Arthurian texts both exclusively English as well as those based on or inspired by French sources.

Sir Gawain, being King Arthur's nephew, was always an important figure in the medieval Arthurian legend. In the English poems of the 14th century Gawain used to be almost more significant than the King himself. In a group of verse narratives of distinctively English origin, including *Avowing of King Arthur*, *Awntyrrs of Arthur* and *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*, Sir Gawain is presented as a paragon of courtesy and knightly prowess. As much as the French tradition dismissed him and assigned all honour to Lancelot, to the English Sir Gawain represented the flower of all courtesy and gentleness, and all other knights, excepting only Arthur himself, are usually foils to his prowess and nobility (Barber 2004: 105). This magnificence of

Gawain is clearly a reminiscence of an older tradition of the first histories of Arthur's court, where Gawain is called Gwalchmei, the Hawk of May. Some scholars claim his literary descent to be from the Celtic hero Cuchulainn, and indeed the beheading game adventure can be found in the early Irish epic *Bricriu's Feast*. Although this particular story, as reworked in the masterpiece *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, is of highest artistic value, Sir Gawain often acted as a hero of folk-tales and popular yet rather primitive stories. This in a way allows one to understand the superiority of Gawain's figure in English writing.

As Richard Barber claims, the English preferred stories briefer than their French counterparts. They were not interested in heartsearchings and lengthy soliloquies of Chrétien's heroes, demanding instead adventures and marvels. Love in English stories was little discussed, and it was its physical side that was more enthusiastically exploited. Also the wealth of the kings and princes was not tacitly assumed or indicated, but described at length with obvious amazement and wonder. That particular tendency can be seen in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in the description of Gawain's armour, which is full of details obviously underlining his magnificent wealth. Probably the English taste was the exact reason why the *Gawain* poet clad his protagonist in a richly embroidered parade-like armour, equipped with an obsolete great helm which due to its significance and decoration was still a popular tournament head-guard. Gawain was a fashionable and a bit cocky young knight who was expected to show off and dress (or arm) to impress. Exaggerations were cheerfully welcomed and the greatest demand of the audience was for combat scenes. Sir Gawain being a courteous Ladies' Knight but at the same time a proud, sometimes overconfident youth and a bold or even reckless fighter, was clearly the best choice for the tastes of English addressees. Neither as romanticised as Lancelot, nor as pure as Galahad, Gawain must have been immensely appealing for the war-loving class of English knights.

Just as the times changed, Sir Gawain's role in the Arthurian legend altered. In Malory's work the role of the King's best man is taken by Lancelot, which was probably caused by the author's inspiration with the French works in which Gawain was not very popular. There were two main reasons for that state of affairs: firstly, Sir Gawain was not a "French" knight like Lancelot or Tristram and therefore the French audience would have dismissed him for the sake of "their" knights; furthermore, his Celtic origins and connection to Orkney made of him a barbaric figure in the view of the French authors; secondly, he embodied the secular side of knighthood and its military and courtly interests, which were strongly disapproved of by the clergy. The Cistercian monks who were the authors of the Vulgate cycle did not hesitate to condemn Sir Gawain for his self-indulgent life. Even though Arthur's

nephew was set aside a little, he still had an important though not always becoming place in the story. I dare say Sir Gawain remained the most believable character of all Arthur's Knights in English narratives and therefore I shall argue that his figure is the best commentary on the condition of the 15th century English knighthood.

The first instance Gawain is mentioned by Malory is at the time of his coming to Arthur's court with his mother. The next occasion *Le Morte Darthur* speaks of him is the foreshadowing of his revenge upon King Pellinore, his father's killer, followed a couple of chapters later by a prophecy of his own death by his friend's sword. As it is manifest Gawain is entwined in a circle of death and vengeance from the very beginning of the story. That state must have been well known to the fighters of the Wars of the Roses. One instance of a similar vindictive action is a case in point. Lord Clifford was killed during the first Battle of St. Albans in 1455 by the Duke of York. Five years later, at the Battle of Wakefield, Duke of York and his son Earl of Rutland, a boy of 17, were killed. The Earl of Rutland had fallen into the hands of the then Lord Clifford and on his knees begged for mercy. Clifford stabbed him to death saying, according to a chronicler, "By God's blood, thy father slew mine, and so will I do thee and all thy kin!" (Edge 1988: 97). Clearly, the doings of Sir Gawain were a good representation of the state of matters during the civil war. Later in his career Gawain enters yet another act of vengeance: in a way continuing his blood feud, he calls his brothers to help him slay their mother's lover, Sir Lamorak, King Pellinor's son. Eventually, Gawain, accompanied by his brothers Agravain, Gaheris, and his half-brother Mordred ambushes Sir Lamorak and kills him after a long-lasting struggle. For that deed they were called by Tristram "the grettyste distroyers and murtherars of good knyghtes" (Vinaver 1971: 422).

Those two killings, though the most meaningful, were not the only ones Sir Gawain committed. Shortly after Sir Gawain's knighting, a feast of the wedding of King Arthur and Queen Guinevere takes place. Suddenly a white hart, pursued by a white brachet, dashes into the hall. The hart had been bitten by the brachet and leaping overthrew a knight who in turn took up the brachet and rode away with it. Soon after a lady comes crying and pleading King Arthur to retrieve her brachet but before he can react a knight all-armed appears and abducts the lady. Thus, the first of the triple-quest-pattern adventures begins for, following Merlin's advice, King Arthur sends Sir Gawain, Sir Tor and King Pellinore to retrieve respectively the hart, the brachet and the lady. Both of the abducting knights were to be brought before Arthur or else slain. Gawain is the only one of the three avengers who does not go alone on his journey. He takes his brother, Gaheris, as a squire. Before I move on with the story I would like to point out that Sir Gawain most often in his adventures is accompanied by his brethren. He also does

rely on their opinions and usually consults them in important matters. A villain figure as he seems to be in *Le Morte Darthur*, Gawain is also a family man, one who cherishes family ties above all. It is enough to recall that the reason of his strife with Lancelot was exactly the desire to avenge his kin slain by Guinevere's lover. During the Wars of the Roses the family ties and patron connections had to come above all other values. Sir Thomas Malory himself changed the sides in the Wars of the Roses following Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick, with whose house he had a strong connection.

Gawain's care for kinship is even further presented when, having gone on the quest for the white hart, he meets two fighting brothers. He stops their strife telling them that brothers never should fight each other and threatens to fight them both unless they stop the strife and go to King Arthur's castle to offer him their service. The brothers consented and Sir Gawain continued his chase. On the way he met yet another adventure:

...before hym there was a grete ryver; and the herte swam over; and as sir Gawayn wolde a folowed afftir there stood a knyght on the other side and seyde, 'Sir knyght, com nat over afftir thys harte but if thou wolt juste with me.' 'I woll nat fayle as for that,' seyde Sir Gawayne, 'to folow the queste that I am inne.' And so made hys horse swymme over the watir. And anone they gate their glaives, and ran togydirs fulle harde, but Gawayne smote hym of hys horse and bade him yelde hym. 'Nay,' seyde the knyght, 'nat so, for thoughe ye have the better of me on horsebak. I pray the, valyaunte knyght, alyght on foote, and macch we togidir withoure swerdis.'...Then anythir dressed their shylds and smote togydir, but sir Gawayne smote hym so harde thorow the helme that hit wente to the brayne and the knyght felle downe dede. 'A,' seyde Gaherys, 'that was a myghty stroke of a yonge knyght. (Vinaver 1971: 65)

As depicted here, Sir Gawain is not only a skilful fighter but also an example for his own kith and kin. In addition, this story introduces an instance of a happening very popular in the 15th century. The *pas d'armes* was a new kind of daring inspired by knightly romances and poems. In its concept it revolved around the idea that one or a number of challengers took hold of some piece of ground, a pass or a bridge, and had to fight against all comers, either knights or squires.

But coming back to Sir Gawain's adventure I should mention that after his duel by the riverside he chased the white hart into a castle. His greyhounds managed to capture and slay the hart before Sir Gawain could react. When that happened an unknown knight came out of a castle chamber sword-in-hand and slew two of Gawain's greyhounds before his eyes:

'Why have ye slain my howndys? For they dyd but their kynde, and I wolde that ye had wrokyn youre angir uppon me rather than uppon a dome beste.' 'Thou

seyst trouth,' seyde the knyght, 'I have avenged me on thy howndys, and so I woll on the or thou go.' Than sir Gawayne alyght on foote and dressed hys shyld, and stroke togydirs myghtyly and clave their shyldis and stoned their helmys and brake their hawbirkes that their blode thirled downe to their feete. So at the last sir Gawayne smote so harde that the knyght felle to the erthe, and than he cryed mercy and yelded hym and besought him as he was a jantyll knyght, to save hys lyff. (Vinaver 1971: 65–66)

This is a situation most recurrent in the vast multitude of the Arthurian tales. The same pattern is reappearing throughout the Arthurian legend and though the characters change, the basic scheme remains the same. Typically, one of Arthur's followers fights against a challenger and having overcome him after a long, exhausting struggle grants him his life if the latter promises to serve the King. Interestingly enough this time the pattern is broken:

'Thou shalt dey,' seyde sir Gawayne, for sleyng of my howndis.' 'I woll make amendys,' seyde the knyght, 'to my power.' But sir Gawayne wolde no mercy have, but unlaced hys helme to have strekyn of hys hede. (Vinaver 1971: 66)

Here Malory shows the vengeful, unforgiving Sir Gawain, the killer of good knights. Surely the majority of readers remember the widely respected custom of taking defeated knights captive. This tradition was deeply rooted in the medieval war culture but as we can see on the example of the Battle of Agincourt and the Battle of Towton merciless slaughter of equals was not entirely unknown to the 15th century knights. Obviously it was not a behaviour to be praised but the fact is that the knights were not always so willing to spare their enemies' lives.

While Sir Thomas Malory chose to follow the French in portraying Sir Gawain as a rather villainous figure, at approximately the same time there existed a tale showing him in quite an opposite way. *The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawain* is said to be a worthy counterpart to the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* "as the single richest and most impressive romance of arms and battle that survives from late medieval Britain."² In short, the plot of this masterpiece is as follows: King Arthur and his knights go on a pilgrimage whose very aim is the Holy City. On the road to Jerusalem, the knights encounter a well-fortified castle, "the seymliast sight that ever couth I see" (line 255). Sir Spynagros (who is a commentator of the whole episode) explains that the lord of this castle, Sir Gologras, serves no lord. Hearing that, King Arthur vows to gain lordship over Gologras at any cost. After completing their pilgrimage to the Holy Land, Arthur and his knights besiege Gologras. Finally a hand-to-hand encounter between Sir Gawain and Sir Gologras takes place. As Sir Gawain gains the upper hand, Sir Gologras demands to die honorably by his hand. Sir Gawain tries to

persuade the other to capitulate and Gologras agrees to keep his life under the condition that Sir Gawain will pretend to have been defeated and to walk off the field as his prisoner so that Gologras can save face in front of his people, then he will see that matters are resolved to Sir Gawain's liking once he is in his castle. In accord with his own perfect courtesy and his belief in Gologras' faultless honor, Gawain agrees. In the castle, accordingly, Sir Gologras addresses his men and presents them with the actual state of things. Being under a great impression of Sir Gawain's extraordinary display of knightly courtesy, Gologras' people accept fealty to King Arthur. As we can see the late 15th century witnessed a binary tradition of Sir Gawain's nature. While Malory, following the French, described him mainly in an unflattering manner, other English authors still retained the picture of Sir Gawain the perfect knight.

It might seem that Malory, portraying Sir Gawain as a vengeful, merciless knight-slayer did enough harm to this character. But in the adventure of the white hart he goes even further to vilify Arthur's nephew, making him a woman-killer: "Ryght so com hys lady oute of a chambir and felle over hym, and so he smote of hir hede by myssefortune" (Vinaver 1971: 66). Even Gaheris is stunned by this act and, though he praised his brother a couple of lines earlier, he condemns him now: "that ys fowle and shamefully done, for that shame shall never frome you" and next he lectures Sir Gawain saying: "Also ye sholde gyff mercy unto them that aske mercy, for a knight withoute mercy ys withoute worship" (Vinaver 1971: 66). The pattern comes back on the right track after this gruesome happening as Sir Gawain sends the defeated knight under a threat of death to Arthur's court. Being then ambushed by four knights and shot in the arm by an archer Sir Gawain is sent by mysterious four ladies to Camelot. Carrying the heads of both the white hart and the lady, he comes before the King and the queen:

Than the kynge and the queene were gretely displeased with sir Gawayne for the sleyng of the lady, and there by ordynaunce of the queene there was sette a queste of ladyes uppon sir Gawayne, and they juged hym for ever whyle he lyved to be with all ladyes, and to fyght for hir quarels; and that ever that he sholde be curteyse, and never to refuse mercy to hym that askith mercy. Thus was sir Gawayne sworne uppon the four Evaungelystis that he sholde never be ayenste lady ne jantillwoman but if he fyght for a lady and his adversary fyghtith for another. (Vinaver 1971: 67)

One might say that in this way Malory skilfully introduced the reason for Sir Gawain's status as Ladies' Knight, where the mere courtesy and knowledge of courtly love was a good enough reason for earlier writers.

In fact, one of the most popular plots showing Sir Gawain's good nature

and love for all women is the one illustrated in the tales such as *The Marraige of Sir Gawain* and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*. In these tales Sir Gawain is asked by King Arthur to marry a hideously ugly woman. Out of loyalty to Arthur, he agrees. After Sir Gawain goes through with the wedding, he is rewarded for his courtesy when his wife turns beautiful. She tells him that she may be beautiful by either day or by night, but not both. Gawain is allowed to choose which way he prefers but instead he lets his wife choose and as a reward, his wife chooses to be beautiful all the time. Again, Gawain triumphs thanks to his perfection in the art of knightly courtesy. This motif had been used also by Geoffrey Chaucer in his *Canterbury Tales* as it constitutes the main plot of the *Wife of Bath's Tale*.

In *Le Morte Darthur*, on the other hand, also Sir Gawain's love for women is shown in an unbecoming way. On one occasion Sir Gawain meets Sir Pelleas who is greatly in love with Lady Ettard, who unfortunately despises him and wishes to have nothing in common with her admirer. Gawain devises a cunning plan and promises Sir Pelleas to help him win his lady's love. They exchange armours and Sir Gawain rides to Lady Ettard to tell her that he slew Sir Pelleas. What happened next shows Sir Gawain as a cunning deceiver, plotter and opportunistic libertine:

'Truly,' seyde she, 'that is grete pyté for he was passynge good knyght of his body. But of all men on lyve I hated hym moste [...] And for ye have slayne hym I shall be your woman and to do onythyng that may please you.' So she made sir Gawayne good chere. Than sir Gawayne sayde that he loved a lady and by no meane she wolde love hym. 'Sche is to blame,' seyde Ettarde, 'and she woll nat love you, for ye that be so well-borne a man and suche a man of prouesse, there is no lady in this worlde to good for you.' 'Woll ye,' seyde sir Gawayne, 'promyse me to do what that ye may, do be the fayth of your body to gete me the love of my lady?' 'Yee, sir [...].' 'Now,' seyde sir Gawayne, 'hit is yourself that I love so well; therefore holde your promyse.' 'I may nat chese,' said the Lady Ettarde, 'but if I sholde be forsworne.' And so she graunted hym to fulfille all his desyre. (Vinaver 1971: 102)

After three days Sir Pelleas, having heard nothing from Sir Gawain, rides to the castle in which his lady lives. On the spot he found three pavilions standing outside the walls and in one of them Sir Gawain and Lady Ettard lying next to each other in one bed. Overwhelmed with sorrow, Sir Pellas rode his steed away from them and then again to the pavilions, a number of times changing his mind on what he should do with the couple. Finally he laid his unsheathed sword between them and departed. Being awoken, Lady Ettard acknowledges Gawain's deceit and Sir Gawain rides away without a word. Once again Malory's disdain for Sir Gawain is clearly visible. This

doing is strongly contradictory to Gawain's behaviour in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, where during his time at the castle, he courteously resists the advances made by the Green Knight's wife, or that in *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*³ where, respecting the man of the house, Sir Gawain courteously restrains himself from making sexual advances to his naked wife. Even though she does kiss him and Gawain accepts a girdle that she gives him, he does not dishonour his host by taking advantage of his wife's interest. In the English tradition Sir Gawain was a lover to many noblewomen but he always remained courteous and true to the rules of courtly love while in Malory's work we can trace the stress on carnal lust and unrestrained self-indulgence ascribed to Sir Gawain by the Cistercians who wrote the Vulgate Cycle.

Although the manners and character of Sir Gawain are changed from bad to worse in *Le Morte Darthur*, Sir Thomas Malory has retained the King's nephew's martial prowess. Unfortunately also in this respect Sir Gawain seems to depart quite a bit from his earlier portrayal. During King Arthur's campaign against the Emperor of Rome the belligerent nature of Sir Gawain is fully exhibited, though slight but meaningful traces of its alteration are visible. One time King Arthur did call Sir Gawaine, Sir Bors, Sir Lionel, and Sir Bedivere, and commanded them to "ryde streyte unto sir Lucius and say [Arthur] bydde hym in haste to remeve oute of [Arthurs's] londys" (Vinaver 1971: 123). Clearly a refusal of this kind of request would equal a most bloody battle. The faithful knights did as their liege wished and soon "Sir Gawayne and Sir Borce wente with the message" (Vinaver 19716: 123). Of course the Emperor refused to move his forces, but he was not the only one who had something to say at that time:

Than a knyght that hyght sir Gayus that was cosyn unto the Emperour, he seyde thys wordys: 'Loo! how thes Englyshe Bretouns be braggars on kynde, for ye may see how they boste and bragge as they durste bête all the worlde.' Than grevid sir Gawayne at his grete wordys, and with his bowerly bronde that bright semed he stroke of the hede of sir Gayus the knight. (Vinaver 1971: 124)

In this episode Malory introduces his readers to Sir Gawain they might not have known earlier – the thug-like killer. In stories such as *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle* or Chrétien de Troyes' *Conte du Graal* the King's nephew is depicted as a paragon of courtesy, who remains well-mannered and polite even when insulted. In Malory's work he answers with his sword. He becomes more brutish, violent and short-tempered in his behaviour. Surely that was to be expected in the 15th century where mercenaries buying their nobility for the spoils of warfare and most skilful life-takers among the knights were the ones with greatest survival-expectancy on the battlefields, where a high social

status was no more a life-warrant. And such a reckless swordsman and skilled knight-slayer Sir Gawain proves to be.

Sir Gawain, being one of the best Knights of the Round Table, easily overcomes several enemies single-handedly, delivering blows so heavy that they cut through grown, fully-armoured men like a knife cuts through butter. During the battle with the forces of Rome he is, arguably, the deadliest fighter, as Malory states: “sir Gawaine with his longe swerde leyde on faste, that three amerallys deyde thorow the dynte of his hondis” (Vinaver 1971: 133), a feat unmatched even by Sir Lancelot. Earlier in this paper I have mentioned Richard Barber’s claim that the English audience’s love for Sir Gawain was mainly based upon his warlike character, and scenes such as this one show what Barber means by this. Surely, later in Malory’s work Sir Lancelot takes over the part of the King’s first sword but being a highly romanticised figure he does not display the same unconditional love for battle as Sir Gawain does. Gawain being a knight-killer and a villainous deceiver, addressing his problems with the tip of his sword, in fact seems to fit the knightly tastes more than chaste Lancelot, who in his perfection loses traces of likelihood. Besides, as we know, the English were not as enthusiastic about Lancelot’s affair with the queen as the French. In fact, Malory dismisses a bit the parts of the story concerning this issue and, as he seems not to sympathise with the overall idea, he puts more emphasis on Lancelot’s excellence in the matters of knighthood. Even though Malory’s version of the Arthurian legend is the most recognisable and influential, his treatment of Sir Gawain did not lessen his popularity among the English audience. In fact, Malory’s Gawain could have been closer to the real English knights than any other.

NOTES

¹ I exclude from my consideration *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* which, though mentioned here, is an integral creation of a scope far too wide to be successfully covered in a short article.

² The whole tale as well as some lines of explanation are referred to after the website of the *Project Camelot* and can be found under the address: <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/golfrm.htm>

³ *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle* is a Middle English tail-rhyme romance, composed in about 1400. It is often connected and compared with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* due to a number of similarities including the beheading scene. The full text is to be found on the website of the Camelot Project: <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/gawcfrm.htm>

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