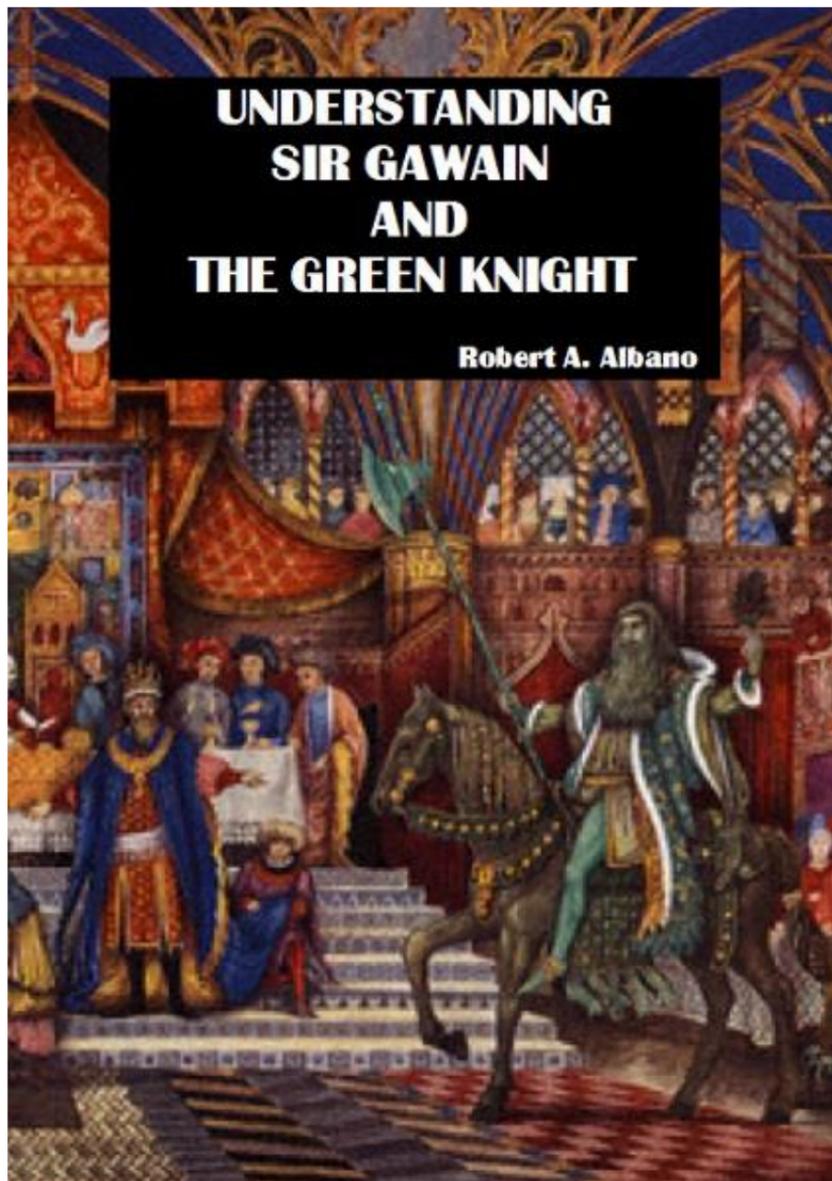


UNDERSTANDING SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

Robert A. Albano



UNDERSTANDING

SIR

GAWAIN

AND

THE

GREEN

KNIGHT

Understanding *Sir Gawain*

UNDERSTANDING

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Robert A. Albano

MERCURYE PRESS

Los Angeles

UNDERSTANDING

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Robert A. Albano

First Printing: December 2016

All Rights Reserved © 2016 by Robert A. Albano

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, or by any information storage retrieval system, without the written permission of the publisher.

MERCURY PRESS

Los Angeles

TABLE OF CONTENTS

7	Introductory Comments
11	The Language and Date of the Romance
15	The Prologue: England and Troy
18	The Challenge of the Green Knight
22	The Beheading Game Motif
24	Beheading in Another Gawain Romance
25	Two Other Gawain Romances
29	The Arming of the Hero: Oral Formula
33	Christian Elements in the Romance
39	Pagan Elements in the Romance
44	The Lack of Digressions
46	Hunting and Seduction: The Structure of Part III
52	The Role of King Arthur
55	A Handbook for Seduction
58	The Theme of Fidelity

INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

Many scholars consider *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to be the best example of the **Medieval Romance**. And this work of literature certainly is worthy of that claim and more: *Gawain* is also one of the greatest works of English literature.

A medieval romance is a long narrative poem with (1) knightly adventures and (2) courtly love. Although the word *romance* suggests love today, when the term is applied to literature, the aspect of **adventure** is the key element. Such adventures would include the knightly hero (1) fighting or jousting against other knights, (2) fighting against giants or monsters, and (3) encountering magical or supernatural creatures. Throughout the Middle Ages many people believed in fairies or demons, giants or monsters. Such beliefs added a sense of enchantment to life, but it also helped to explain matters that people at that time could not explain in any other way. Perhaps, though, we should not be so critical of their superstitions. Even in the 20th century people have believed in strange creatures like the Loch Ness Monster, the Abominable Snow Man, and aliens from outer space. The belief in such fantasies may serve (1) as a psychological need for some people who subconsciously desire to express their imaginations or (2) as an emotional release for the common fears that all of us experience in childhood. In any event,

the belief in the fantastic also serves to arouse our curiosity and entertain us.

The aspect of **courtly love**, however, should not be overlooked. In *Gawain* the element of courtly love is crucial to the story. The word *courtly* suggests, of course, the court of the king or queen. Courtly love is the kind of love, then, exhibited by the best and noblest gentlemen and ladies of the land. It is polite; it is genteel. It suggests good manners and good breeding. In a sense, then, it becomes a social code, a set of rules about how to behave and how to speak when one is pursuing a member of the opposite sex. One key aspect of medieval courtly love is that the lady is **sovereign**. In other words, she is the boss. She is in control of the love-making. The man, on the other hand, is the humble worshipper of the lady. He adores her. He gets down on his knees to her as if she were a goddess. There is a common expression for this idea: **“the lady on the pedestal.”** Like the image of a statue of a Greek or Roman goddess on a stone stand (or pedestal), which the ancient Greeks or Romans might worship, the man treats the woman that he loves with great respect. He looks up to her. He prays that she will notice him.

Often, however, the depiction of courtly love in medieval romances can also include a relationship of **adultery**. The most prominent example of this situation occurs in the stories about King Arthur. Sir Lancelot, a knight who serves Arthur and is an

extremely close friend of his, falls in love with Arthur's wife, Queen Guenivere. Despite the pain that they know Arthur will feel, Lancelot and Guenivere cannot help themselves. Their passion is so strong that they have an affair. But the conflict between Arthur and Lancelot that follows eventually destroys Camelot, the kingdom of Arthur. In *Gawain* the hero does not directly commit an act of adultery, but there are several scenes where he is sorely tempted to do so. In medieval romances where adultery is a part of the action, the lord and the lady (the adulterous pair) still follow the social conventions and manners of courtly love.

Two **motifs** of medieval romances appear in *Gawain*: (1) the beheading game and (2) the idea of temptation and seduction. Both of these details will be discussed in detail later, but the reader should note that these motifs are common to other medieval romances.

Although *Gawain* is truly the best of medieval romances, it has several qualities that are not typical of medieval romances. These **anti-romantic** concepts are part of the reason why *Gawain* surpasses and outshines other romances from the Middle Ages. The author, who is unknown, wrote a romance that is longer, more sophisticated, more entertaining, and ultimately more satisfying than other romances. There are basically four anti-romantic elements that the reader should notice:

- 1 Gawain has **to prove himself** not by fighting, which is the typical way a hero proves himself, but by passively submitting himself to accept a death-blow, a blow that will take off his head.
- 2 The lady is the **wooer** (the one who pursues the member of the opposite sex). In typical romances, the man pursues the lady; and the lady is coy or even refuses the man. In *Gawain* this is inverted (the opposite).
- 3 Gawain also has **to prove himself** by resisting love, by resisting the lady who woos him. In this manner, he is revealing his strength of spirit.
- 4 *Gawain* includes **Christian elements**. The typical romance includes pagan gods and omits any Christian ideas.

The medieval romance, like the epic, developed out of an **oral tradition**. The stories originally began in oral form told by a story-teller and were passed down from one generation to the next over many years and even centuries. The romance is also like the epic in that it concerns a hero and his adventures and also that supernatural or magical monsters may fight the hero. But the

romance, which is a later development in literature, is usually significantly shorter than the epic and includes the courtly element described above.

Although the character of Gawain developed out of an oral tradition, the tale of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* bears the mark, the craftsmanship, of a **single author**. The story may have originally existed in a shorter form that the author heard. But he elaborated upon it: (1) he added details, (2) he extended the plot, (3) he provided more structure, and (4) he added humor to it. So, it is a far superior work of literature compared to any other surviving romance of the Middle Ages. The **structure** is one of the most notable features of *Gawain*. Not only is the entire romance structured by the idea of oath-making (and oath-breaking). But the third part (of the four parts) of the romance contains a clever interweaving of hunting and seduction scenes that parallel each other and are bound together by an agreement or oath made between Gawain and the lord of the castle.

THE LANGUAGE AND DATE OF THE ROMANCE

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight was written in approximately 1370, about the same time (or just a few years before the time, actually) that Geoffrey Chaucer began writing *The Canterbury Tales*. The second part of the 14th century marks the period of great literature in Middle English. Yet, if one compares the Middle English text of the *Canterbury Tales* to *Sir Gawain*, Chaucer's work seems to be much closer to Modern English (which begins about 1500) while *Gawain* seems to be far closer to Old English in vocabulary and style.

There is a very simple explanation for this difference. Chaucer wrote in London. London was where the court was located. If a change were to occur in England, it would occur in London first. This is especially true of changes in the English language. The English language grew and changed tremendously from the time the Anglo-Saxons first inhabited England (around 500 AD) to the time that the Renaissance began in England (around 1500). The language of Chaucer is clearly Middle English. However, it is a Middle English in its final stages of development: it has been affected and altered by the influence of Norman French and other internal changes as well. Nonetheless, it has survived as a

language that has its own defining characteristics.

The language of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, on the other hand, is in the West Midlands dialect. It is in a regional dialect, a form of Middle English that did not incorporate the changes in the language that had occurred or were occurring in London at the time that the author of *Gawain* was living and writing. Thus, the language of *Gawain* seems older than the language used by Chaucer because it had not yet developed and changed. The changes and developments in the language that occurred in London would take many years or even many decades before they would occur in the outer western and northern regions of England.

Another quality of the *Gawain* poem that contributes to the feeling that the language is much older than Chaucer's language is **alliteration**. This poetic feature, which was, of course, common to Old English poetry, was probably used throughout the Middle English period; but not enough poems from the early part of the Middle English period survive for us to be certain of this. In the later part of the 14th century though, several poems have survived to indicate that many poets still enjoyed using alliteration in the creation of their poems.

The poetic technique of *Gawain*, though, is more sophisticated than many other alliterative poems of the time. The poet uses both alliteration and **rhyme**. The length (the number of lines) of each

stanza varies, but the poet always ends each of his stanzas with five rhyming lines known as a “**bob and wheel.**” The first part of each stanza does not rhyme but does use alliteration, and it may be anywhere from 12 to 36 lines long (or possibly longer), but the second part of each stanza is always five lines long (the bob and wheel) and rhymes *ababa*. The “bob,” the first of the five lines, is only two syllables long; but the remaining four lines (the wheel or quatrain) would contain longer lines that not only rhymed but usually contain alliteration as well.

THE PROLOGUE: ENGLAND AND TROY

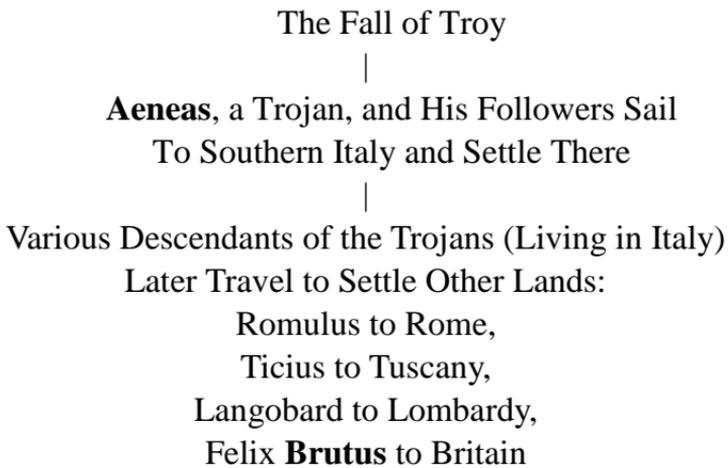
The opening of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the first stanza, might be puzzling to a reader unfamiliar with medieval literature and history. The first stanza serves as a kind of **prologue** or introduction to the tale, but it introduces places and characters that are not part of the main story at all. However, the poet has a very logical, and traditional, reason for beginning in this manner:

The **oral tradition** in medieval literature was extremely important for the people living during the Middle Ages. Since most people could not read or write, the stories being told served not only the purpose of entertainment. They also preserved the **history** of the people so that the names of their ancestors and the glorious deeds of their real-life heroes could be remembered and passed on from one generation to the next. The beginning of *Beowulf*, a student may recall, begins with a history of the early Danes; and the names and deeds of King Hrothgar's father, grandfather, and great-grandfather are given. The oral story-teller, then, is also the court historian.

Medieval romances developed in the same way that the epics did, from an oral tradition. And, so, they too may contain historical elements.

In *Sir Gawain* the poet begins by talking about the fall of Troy during the Trojan War, which occurred around 1200 BC and which is told in

Homer's *The Iliad*. The poet does this, though, because the people of England believed during the Middle Ages that their ancestors could be traced back to the ancient Trojans. The following chart simplifies this heritage:



Of course, the most important of the four Trojan adventurers from the English perspective would be **Brutus**. Brutus traveled from Rome to become the legendary founder of Britain or England. And even several history books from the Middle Ages were called *The Brut* in honor of this legendary figure.

The *Gawain* poet thus uses this historical opening to indicate the greatness and nobility of the line of British kings. Just as King Hrothgar was

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

