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INTERIORITY IN A MIDDLE ENGLISH ROMANCE: THE QUEST INTO THE MINDSCAPE IN *SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

BİR ORTA ÇAĞ İNGİLİZ ROMANSINDA İÇSELLİK: *SİR GAWAİN VE YEŞİL ŞÖVALYE* ROMANSINDA ZİHİNSEL BİR MANZARA ARAYIŞI

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ABSTRACT

Composed by an anonymous poet in the fourteenth century, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight demonstrates such primary features of a conventional medieval romance as the employment of the marvelous elements and the sensuous language, the motives of quest and courtly love. Nevertheless, regarded as an unconventional romance, Sir Gawain also interrogates and transforms the genre of the romance. Gawain is not an unblemished and pure knight. He is neither the paragon of virtue nor the incarnation of ideal perfection. He is portrayed as a flawed, fallible and vulnerable human. He oscillates between the symbols of the pentangle and the girdle, representative of the male principle and the female principle respectively. Hence, the hero has internal conflicts. This paper maintains that Gawain's journey into the uncultivated landscape should be seen as a quest into his own mindscape. This study investigates how the dialectical tension and internal conflicts in the psyche of the hero give the romance modern interiority.

Keywords: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Romance, Generic Features, Transformation, Interiority.*

ÖZ

On dördüncü yüzyılda isimsiz bir şair tarafından yazılan, *Sir Gawain ve Yeşil Şövalye*, olağanüstü öğelerin ve duyumsal bir dilin kullanılışı, yolculuk ve saray aşkı motifleri gibi geleneksel Orta Çağ romansının temel özelliklerini gösterir. Fakat aynı zamanda, geleneksel bir romansa uymayan, alışılmadık özellikleri de olan bu şiir, romans türünü sorgular ve dönüştürür de. Gawain lekesiz ve saf bir şövalye değildir.

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Ne erdemlilik timsali ne de ideal kusursuzluğun mücessem halidir. Kusurlu, yanılabilir ve yaralanabilir bir insan gibi resmedilmiştir. Kalkan ve kemer sembolleri, yani erkeklik ve kadınlık ilkeleri arasında gidip gelmektedir. Bu yüzden de iç çatışmaları vardır. Bu çalışma, Gawain'in ehlileştirilmemiş doğaya doğru yaptığı yolculuğun, aslında kendi zihinsel dünyasına doğru yaptığı bir yolculuk gibi okunmasını önermektedir. Bu çalışma, kahramanın zihnindeki diyalektik gerilimin ve iç çatışmaların bu romansa nasıl modern bir içsellik kazandırdığını araştırmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Sir Gawain ve Yeşil Şövalye, Romans, Tür Özellikleri, Dönüşüm, İçsellik.*

Introduction

M. H. Abrams (1999) describes medieval romances as stories set in a chivalric and courtly era, characterized by refined manners and civility. These narratives typically revolve around a knight embarking on a quest to win a lady's favour (pp. 34-35). Central to medieval romance are themes of adventure and love, where the knight displays his bravery and skill through feats of arms and encounters with the marvellous, and his honour and courtesy through adherence to the traditions of courtly love. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, considered one of the finest medieval English romances, was written by an unknown poet in the late fourteenth century. Krueger (2000) describes it as an "alliterative masterpiece," noted not only for its adherence to the genre but also for its innovative reworking of romance traditions (p. 8). Likewise, Hahn (2000) contends that *Gawain* challenges "the ethos of knighthood" and reshapes the romance genre (p. 222). Thus, this study explores how *Gawain* as a complex, subtle and puzzling poem both exemplifies and transforms the traditional elements of romance, with a focus on the internal conflict between the pentangle, symbolizing the masculine principle, and the girdle, representing the feminine principle, to illustrate how the poem redefines key aspects of the genre.

As for the methodology deployed in the writing of this paper, the practice of close reading is employed in its exploration of *Gawain* within the context of medieval romance, highlighting its alignment with conventional features such as the nostalgic invocation of the past, the use of the marvellous, the quest motif, and the ritualized code of conduct. However, this study moves on to assume a critical stance about the generic features of the romance, emphasizing the unconventional aspects of the narrative, particularly its interrogation and transformation of the romance genre. An analytical interpretation is applied to metaphors, images and linguistic properties of the medieval romance. These images and metaphors are closely read and carefully interpreted; this methodology pays close attention to the minute aspects of poetic language and the particularities of critical approach that focuses on the dialectical oscillations between symbols. Therefore, it dwells upon the nuances of language, individual words, their etymological suggestiveness, the disruption of the syntax and the unfolding of the lines in

addition to discussing how the conventional romance is challenged. The technique of close reading and the meticulous critical attentiveness to the workings of language and the tensions and internal conflicts within the story help one to explore the images of the girdle and the pentangle that are fundamental to *Gawain.* By carrying out a textual analysis, this paper attempts to demonstrate how the quest into the uncultivated landscape morphs into the journey into the mindscape of the romance hero and how this innovative reworking of the romance genre earns the hero interiority.

Generic Features of Medieval Romance in *Sir Gawain and the Green Night*

One of the key characteristics of medieval romance is its tendency to "invoke the past or the socially remote" (Beer, 1970, p. 2). In *Gawain*, the poet references King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table, particularly focusing on Gawain. For a medieval audience hearing this tale, the depiction of Arthur's illustrious reign evokes the "perennially childlike quality of romance," which is characterized by a deep sense of nostalgia and a longing for an "imaginative golden age in time or space" (Frye, 2000, p. 186). The poem invokes the past right from its opening, briefly recounting the mythical history of Britain and Arthur's Trojan lineage prior to transitioning to a vibrant description of the Christmas feast at Arthur’s court, brimming with youthfulness and cheerfulness:

> Since the siege and the assault was ceased at Troy,
>
> The walls breached and burnt down to brands and ashes,
>
> The knight that had knotted the nest of deceit
>
> Was impeached for his perfidy, proven most true,
>
> It was high-born Aeneas and his haughty race
>
> That since prevailed over provinces, and proudly reigned
>
> Over well-nigh all the wealth of the West Isles. (*Gawain*, 2000, p. 158)

The Gawain-poet invokes the past by referencing the fall of Troy and notable figures such as Aeneas and Brutus, the legendary founder of Britain. In addition to this connection to the past, *Gawain* also invokes the socially remote. Gawain’s winter journey north, described as "the perilous journey" (Frye, 2000, p. 187), represents a quest into the wild, beyond the familiar and the probable. This journey is depicted as an "excursion into fallen and dangerous Nature, a journey from the known, the ordered, to the unknown” and a voyage into “isolation and danger" as the hero departs from “the company of the court and Christendom” (Gardner, 2011, p. 74). Disconnected from the familiar confines of the social world, Gawain sets out on a quest into the unhomely, transgressing beyond the civilised realm and venturing into *terra incognita*. The idea that the life of every individual is “a quest fraught with dangers and temptations” renders Gawain’s journey attractive and accessible (Green, 1986, p. 103).

The poem mythologizes the foundation of Britain by blending the fabulous with the historical, illustrating how the Gawain-poet merges realism and romance (Saunders, 2010, p. 193). As a result, this medieval romance flourishes "in the shifting borderland between legend and fact" (Beer, 1970, p. 22). This fusion of history and myth highlights the imaginative nature of romance, indicating that such stories, while rooted in history, are not to be viewed as purely historical accounts. The fantastic elements provide an escape from the rational world, transforming history into a legendary past, driven by the desire for an imaginative departure from reality.

Romances are "written primarily to entertain," with the poet crafting tales that "drive the night away" and transport the reader and audience into a magical world, freeing them from everyday constraints (Beer, 1970, pp. 2-3). By transgressing the boundaries of the normal and the ordinary, romances become a source of fun and enjoyment. In this spirit, King Arthur, described as "the comeliest king" of Camelot, wishes to hear a chivalrous adventure before dining, driven by the restless energy of his "young blood" and his wild imagination (*Gawain*, 2000, p. 159-160). Arthur's wish is granted by the sudden arrival of the Green Knight, "a monstrous figure who inhabits the borders of reality" (Saunders, 2010, p. 194). This grotesque character blurs the line between the real and the fantastical, offering the reader and the audience an imaginative escape. The massive Green Knight rides into the hall and issues a startling challenge; he dares someone to cut off his head with the enormous axe he carries on condition that they meet him at the Green Chapel in a year to receive the same fate in return (*Gawain*, 2000, p. 161). This unexpected entrance of the Green Knight establishes a magical atmosphere, underscoring that "the province of the romance is [...] the impossible" (Beer, 1970, p. 7). The people of Camelot are thus transported from the rational realm into one of mystery and irrationality, as the Green Knight's challenge and his improbable appearance heighten the sense of the unknown: "Great wonder grew in hall / At his hue most strange to see" (*Gawain*, 2000, p. 161). When the Green Knight enters Arthur's court, he appears as "an otherworldly apparition come to disrupt a joyous aristocratic world," initiating the hero's departure from the court and thereby launching the narrative (Rider, 2000, p. 118). This spectral figure disrupts the harmonious celebrations in the stately hall, setting the stage for the marvellous elements that propel the fantastic tale. The court's structured order is confronted by forces that defy it, marking a shift from the familiar to the extraordinary.

The Gawain-poet utilizes the convention of the marvellous to transcend everyday life, a central drive of fiction according to Beer (1970, p. 10). The romance genre, as noted by Saunders (2010), explores "a larger, spirit world that includes God, devil, angels, demons, and ambiguous spirits, alongside the monsters and marvels within the created world" (p. 207). Beer (1970) further describes romance as featuring "a serene intermingling of the unexpected with the everyday" (p. 10). In *Gawain*, this blend is evident as the narrative intertwines the real-life setting of Camelot with the supernatural intrusion of the Green Knight. Through this monstrous figure, the romance elevates the

mundane into the realm of the extraordinary, leaving the assembled court staring in awe as he delivers his challenge:

> For much did they marvel what it might mean
>
> That a horseman and a horse should have such a hue,
>
> Grow green as the grass, and greener, it seemed,
>
> Than green fused on gold more glorious by far. (*Gawain*, 2000, p. 163)

This passage from the romance vividly illustrates the use of the marvellous in medieval romances. The Green Knight dispels rationality and draws the audience into the realm of the irrational. The spectators are struck with wonder and astonishment; they are mesmerized by the spectral figure's appearance, and the marvellous quality of the Green Knight leaves them awestruck and petrified within the grandeur of Arthur's court.

The use of the marvellous is further highlighted in the scene where Gawain beheads the Green Knight, only for the Green Knight to survive the decapitation. Prompted by the Green Knight's audacity, Arthur grabs the axe himself, but Gawain, with impeccable politeness, convinces him that such a game is more suited to someone of lesser rank: "this folly befits not a king" (*Gawain*, 2000, p. 166). Gawain then delivers a single blow that severs the Green Knight's head, yet the Knight picks up his head and, after reminding Gawain of his promise, rides out of the hall, and

> [t]hen goes to the green steed, grasps the bridle,
>
> Steps into the stirrup, bestrides his mount,
>
> And his head by the hair in his hand holds,
>
> And as steady he sits in the stately saddle
>
> As he had met with no mishap, nor missing were his head. (*Gawain*, 2000, p. 176)

The Gawain-poet deploys the marvellous to transcend the limits of rationalism, drawing the reader and the onlookers at Camelot away from their everyday lives. The presence of the Green Knight liberates them from the constraints of their routine, allowing them to escape into a realm defined by "a peculiar vagrancy of imagination" (Beer, 1970, p. 4). This engagement with the fabulous enables them to drift into an imagined domain, free from the inhibitions of their daily existence.

A recurring pattern is a crucial structural element in *Gawain*, known for its meticulous organization (Fisher, 2000, p. 152). For example, the initial beheading of the Green Knight is mirrored by the return blow Gawain will receive at the poem's conclusion. The poem also features a cyclical sense of time, accentuated by the recurring seasonal patterns

(Abrams, 2000, p. 157). This patterning complements the narrative technique of *entrelacement*, where stories are interwoven so that nothing is left unresolved or neglected (Beer, 1970, p. 21). Likewise, scenes of seduction in the chamber are interlaced with hunting scenes in the woods: "the narrative follows the same pattern: descriptions of the host out hunting alternate with his wife's visits to Gawain's chamber, and each evening ends with a merry making where the two men exchange their winnings" (Burrow, 1982, p. 214). Similarly, the beheading game and the castle temptations plotlines are cleverly intertwined, juxtaposing Gawain's high virtue with his susceptibility to women (Butterfield, 2007, p. 206). This contrast highlights Gawain's internal conflict between his loyalty to his lord and his courtly behaviour towards women. Cooper (2004) refers to this technique as "mirror symmetry," noting how the bedroom scenes correspond to the hunting scenes, the pentangle aligns with the girdle, and the first blow is reflected in the return blow (p. 59). These narrative devices are functional, weaving together distinct elements into a cohesive whole, thereby achieving "the integral, unified structure of *Gawain*" (Fries, 1986, p. 74). Diverse characters and episodes move freely yet are intricately interwoven to form a unified and coherent narrative.

Another key feature of medieval romance is the motif of the quest. Frye (2000) identifies the "central form of quest-romance" as the dragon-slaying theme (p. 189), which in *Gawain* is represented by the Green Knight. Gawain undertakes a quest marked by "dust and sweat," a journey of self-discovery where he grows stronger through his trials and errors (Cooper, 2004, p. 51). While quests often involve searching for treasure, whether it be a grail, gold, or a dragon's hoard, Beer (1970) notes that "the object of the quest serves as the love-object" (p. 3). In Gawain's case, the quest is a journey to fulfil his destiny and receive a return blow from the Green Knight. This journey is not just about proving his bravery and skill but also about upholding the honour of the Round Table. The true object of Gawain's quest may be considered his own reputation and personal integrity rather than rescuing a damsel. The quest motif is illustrated in the following lines:

> Many a cliff must he climb in country wild;
>
> Far off from all his friends, forlorn must he ride;
>
> At each strand or stream where the stalwart passed
>
> 'Twere a marvel if he met not some monstrous foe,
>
> And that so fierce and forbidding that fight he must. (*Gawain*, 2000, p. 173)

Gawain's quest is populated by fantastic creatures and improbable beings, yet as a brave knight, he endures the challenges of this perilous journey. The sense of the supernatural is firmly established through Gawain's adventure, as he navigates the realm of the irrational.

Another characteristic of medieval romance evident in *Gawain* is its rich, sensuous descriptions. Beer (1970) notes that romances are filled with "figures whose emotions and relationships are directly registered and described with profuse sensuous detail" (p. 2). The vivid depiction of the Green Knight, for instance, appeals to the reader's senses, enhancing the immersive experience of the narrative:

> Fair flowing tresses enfold his shoulders;
>
> A beard big as a bush on his breast hangs,
>
> That with heavy hair, that from his head falls,
>
> Was evened all about above both his elbows. (*Gawain*, 2000, p. 162)

The exterior richness of the romance, showcased through sensuously detailed descriptions, is complemented by the interiority of the knight's characterization, which is subtly conveyed through the landscape descriptions that reflect his inner state. As Beer (1970) observes, elements such as "the spring, a garden, landscapes fair or wasted, white, black" are used to explore the knight's psyche (p. 18). The poet vividly portrays physical reality, with the tangled woods, monsters, and marvels encountered by Gawain serving as metaphors for the mental and emotional landscape in which he exists:

> Near slain by the sleet he sleeps in his irons
>
> More nights than enough, among naked rocks,
>
> Where clattering from the crest the cold stream ran
>
> And hung in hard icicles high overhead.
>
> Thus in peril and pain and predicaments dire
>
> He rides across country till Christmas Eve. (*Gawain*, 2000, p. 173)

As the year progresses, Gawain sets out for the mysterious Green Chapel. On Christmas morning, he arrives at the castle of Hautdesert, where he is warmly welcomed by Lord Bercilak, the male shapeshifter, whose court is presented as "a type of libidinous playground" as well as "a testing ground" of will (Wasserman, 1986, p. 113). Bercilak invites him to stay until New Year's Day, promising to guide him to the Green Chapel. During the Christmas festivities, Gawain meets Bercilak's charming wife, the enchantress, and her unattractive old companion. Bercilak proposes a game: he will go hunting each day while Gawain remains at the castle, being entertained by the lady of the house. At the end of each day, they will yield the day's winnings to one another.

Each day, as Lord Bercilak goes hunting for various game, the narrative alternates between the hunt and Gawain's encounters in the bedroom. The seductive lady of the

house seeks to tempt Gawain, and the narrative then returns to complete the account of the hunt. The lady is seen as "the instrument of a test in which, in a sense recapitulating the fall of Adam, Gawain will fall from perfect grace" (Gardner, 2011, p. 76). Throughout these encounters, Gawain remains courteous and adheres to the virtues embodied by the pentangle on his shield. He is also faithful to the Virgin Mary by whom he is protected, which embodies his idealisation (Hall, 1986, p. 89). Gawain faithfully exchanges the first kiss he receives on the first day and the two kisses from the second day for the trophies of the hunt. On the third day, despite initially seeming to abandon her efforts, the lady presses him to accept a ring as a love-gift. When he turns it down, she grants him a simple green girdle, an “intimate” gift that has the magical property of protecting its wearer from harm (Saunders, 2010, p. 138). In a moment of frailty, Gawain agrees to take the girdle and swears that he will conceal it from the lord. During the evening's exchange of winnings, he presents Bercilak with three kisses instead of the day's hunting trophies, which should be seen as a manifestation of his “homosocial play with the host” (Pugh, 2008, p. 164).

Allegory is another crucial aspect of the romance genre. Beer (1970) argues that allegory is a key component of romance artistry, noting that its presence is usually clearly indicated and its interpretation straightforward. He suggests that “the symbols are usually organically related to normal experience” (p. 18). This perspective is evident in traditional romances, where symbols like the rose represent the lady. In *Gawain*, the fox serves as a symbol of deceit, mirroring Gawain’s own concealment from the lord. As Burrow (1982) explains, “the description of the wily beast failing, despite all its tricks, to escape from its adversary calls to mind Gawain’s recent ‘sleight’ in the face of death and predicts for it, symbolically, an unhappy outcome” (p. 217). Likewise, the symbols of the pentangle and the girdle are fundamental in *Gawain*. The pentangle is “a very old symbol of perfection” (Gardner, 2011, p. 71):

> It is a sign by Solomon sagely devised
>
> To be a token of truth, by its title of old,
>
> For it is a figure formed of five points,
>
> And each line is linked and locked with the next
>
> For ever and ever, and hence it is called
>
> In all England, as I hear, the endless knot. (*Gawain,* 2000, p. 171)

The pentangle, symbolizing “interlinked virtues that together encapsulate knightly perfection” (Cooper, 2004, p. 160), represents truth and chivalric ideals. Gawain’s truth reflects “faith pledged by one’s word and owed to a lord, a spouse, or anyone who puts someone else under an obligation” (Abrams, 2000, p. 157). Gawain is tested against this ideal of chivalry, particularly his loyalty to his lord, Arthur, and his mission to uphold the

Round Table's reputation. However, this ideal is challenged by the allegory of the girdle. Referred to as "the adversary's belt" (Luttrell, 1988, p. 108), the girdle represents not Gawain's triumph but his failure, illustrating his human fallibility and imperfection (Cooper, 2004, p. 160).

The pentangle and the girdle are set in a dialectical relationship, embodying opposing principles. The pentangle represents the male principle and Gawain's fidelity to King Arthur and his court. In contrast, the girdle symbolizes the feminine principle, with Bercilak's unnamed wife and Morgan le Fay embodying "a powerfully ambiguous female principle" (Brewer, 1997, p. 9). Gawain's adherence to the male principle and his covenant with Arthur and Lord Bercilak is undermined by the influence of the feminine principle, personified by the lord's unnamed wife:

> I shall give you my girdle; you gain less thereby.
>
> She released a knot lightly, and loosened a belt
>
> That was caught about her kirtle, the bright cloak beneath,
>
> Of a gay green silk, with gold overwrought,
>
> And the borders all bound with embroidery fine,
>
> And this she presses upon him and pleads with a smile. (*Gawain*, 2000, p. 196)

Gawain accepts the girdle from the lady, who claims that it provides protection from any harm, and agrees to keep it hidden from the lord. The lady explains to Gawain: "If he bore it on his body, belted about, / There is no hand under heaven that could hew him down, / For he could not be killed by any craft on earth" (*Gawain*, 2000, p. 196). Sir Gawain reflects on her offer: "It was a pearl for his plight, the peril to come / When he gains the Green Chapel to get his reward: / Could he escape unscathed, the scheme were noble!" (*Gawain*, 2000, p. 196). Gawain is swayed by the temptress to wear the girdle, which she presents as a token of love. This token of affection from the seductress undermines the token of truth represented by the pentangle.

Gawain journeys to the Green Chapel with a guide and arrives alone at an ancient cavern, "a hollow mound" overgrown with vegetation (Luttrell, 1988, p. 108). There, he faces the dreadful Green Knight, described as "the Devil's agent" and "a symbolic summary of all that opposes the law of God, a fusion of elf-knight, druid, and fiend" (Gardner, 2011, pp. 81-2). Gawain succumbs his neck to the axe, and at the third stroke, the Green Knight delivers only a minor nick. When Gawain reacts with relief, the Knight reveals himself as Bercilak, metamorphosed by Morgan le Fay's magic to test the Round Table's fearlessness and strength. Although Gawain performed admirably, Bercilak notes that Gawain's only failure was breaking his promise on the third day, resulting in the nick on his neck. Mortified and humiliated, Gawain rejects any praise for his near-success and

returns to court wearing the girdle as a symbol of his shame. Arthur and the court welcome him back, attempting to lighten the mood by laughing off his discomfiture, and decide that everyone will wear the girdle as a badge of honour.

The dialectic between the pentangle and the girdle epitomizes the central conflict in *Gawain*. This tension arises from "the conflict between human selfishness and the ideal of selfless courtesy" (Gardner, 2011, p. 70). The pentangle symbolizes selflessness and the ideal of chivalry, while the girdle represents selfishness. This opposition is gendered, with the pentangle associated with the masculine principle and the girdle with the feminine principle. This internal struggle within the hero's psyche reflects the broader clash between these two principles. Gawain is portrayed as "the convergence point of self-examination and self-promotion, of niggling conscience and unflinching violence" (Hahn, 2000, p. 222). Pearsall (2003) highlights that Gawain embodies "the contradictions at the heart of the chivalric code" (p. 77). He is a figure of duality, embodying both "disorder and order" as he is the nephew of both Morgan le Fay and King Arthur (Gardner, 2011, p. 79). Consequently, Gawain carries within him both the pentangle and the girdle, representing his inherited legacy of cosmos and chaos. The central structure of medieval romance is often dialectical, characterized by a conflict between the hero and the antagonist (Frye, 2000, p. 187). Typically, in such romances, the hero is idealized as gallant or pure, while the adversary is portrayed as villainous or cowardly (Frye, 2000, p. 195). The hero's triumph over the monstrous antagonist usually leads to a "magical resolution," a hallmark of conventional romances (Hahn, 2000, p. 225).

A ritualized code of conduct is a prominent feature in medieval romance, exemplified in *Gawain*. Beer (1970) notes that such romances often adhere to a "strongly enforced code of conduct" that governs the characters' actions (p. 10). In the poem, this code is embodied in Gawain's pact with the Green Knight, where he agrees to a beheading game with the understanding that he will face a return blow in a year's time. Gawain's commitment is not only to his own honour but also to upholding the reputation of the Round Table. Burrow (1982) emphasizes that Gawain remains resolute in fulfilling his promise, aiming to uphold both his own and the Round Table's honour (p. 211). The code of conduct also features in the agreement between Lord Bercilak and Gawain to exchange their daily winnings: "Whatever I win in the woods I will give you at eve, / And all you have earned you must offer to me" (*Gawain*, 2000, p. 181). Gawain adheres to this agreement on the first two days, trading his winnings truthfully with the lord (*Gawain*, 2000, p. 193). However, he breaches the code of conduct on the third day by hiding the green girdle given to him by Lady Bercilak, who asks him to conceal it from her husband for her sake (*Gawain*, 2000, p. 196). Gawain accepts the girdle, believing it will protect him from harm, which ultimately leads to his failure to fully honour his initial commitment:

> Yet he wore not for its wealth that wondrous girdle,

Nor pride in its pendants, though polished they were,

Though glittering gold gleamed at the ends,

But to keep himself safe when consent he must

To endure a deadly dint, and all defense denied. (*Gawain*, 2000, p. 200)

Gawain accepts the lady's token of love out of a desire for self-preservation, but in doing so, he fails to uphold his promise to the lord to exchange whatever he gains each day. Consequently, this breach of the code of conduct results in Gawain receiving a nick in the neck on the third day: "True men pay what they owe; / No danger then in sight. / You failed at the third throw, / So take my tap, sir knight" (*Gawain*, 2000, p. 206). Lord Bercilak informs Gawain that his lack of faithfulness stems not from courtship but from self-preservation: "Yet you lacked, sir, a little in loyalty there, / But the cause was not cunning, nor courtship either, / But that you loved your own life" (*Gawain*, 2000, p. 206). Gawain's failure to uphold his honour and courage causes him to shrink "in shame" (*Gawain*, 2000, p. 206). In his frustration, he curses his own cowardice, clutches the green girdle, and unties it in a fit of rage (*Gawain*, 2000, p. 207). His intense reaction underscores the central importance of the chivalric code—honour, faith, truth, courage, and prowess—within the medieval romance. Gawain's anger reveals the profound impact of his failure and the damage done to his allegiance to his lord:

Behold there my falsehood, ill hap betide it!,

Your cut taught me cowardice, care for my life,

And coveting came after, contrary both

To largesse and loyalty belonging to knights.

Now am I faulty and false, that fearful was ever

Of disloyalty and lies, bad luck to them both! (*Gawain*, 2000, p. 207)

Gawain chooses to wear the girdle as a symbol of the blame he carries for his fault as he heads back to Camelot (*Gawain*, 2000, p. 209). He will wear the girdle as "a penitential reminder of his faults and the weakness of the flesh" (Blanch, 1986, p. 99). He shamefully acknowledges his flaws. Upon arriving, he is deeply ashamed, and his cheeks flush with embarrassment as he reveals the nick on his neck (*Gawain*, 2000, p. 209). He is spiritually renewed through penitence.

The knightly code of conduct for men is contrasted with the courtly love tradition that governs the relationship between the knight and the lady. This vital relationship is centred on "two lovers: the lady and 'her' man" (Beer, 1970, p. 22). Gawain's interactions with Lady Bercilak illustrate his adherence to the courtly love tradition. When the lady visits him in his chamber, Gawain submits himself to her will and she tests his courtesy by

treating him as her "captive knight" (*Gawain*, 2000, p. 183). The lady expects Gawain to court her: "My body is here at hand, / Your each wish to fulfil; / Your servant to command / I am, and shall be still" (*Gawain*, 2000, p. 184). She tells Gawain that she has observed in him "the comeliness and courtesies and courtly mirth" (p. 184). Gawain responds by acknowledging that he is her servant and regards her as his sovereign. Despite his attempts to maintain a respectful distance "with feat words and fair," the lady skilfully entices him, drawing him into the courtesies expected of the ideal knight: "Good lady, I grant it at once! / I shall kiss at your command, as becomes a knight, / And more, lest you mislike, so let be, I pray" (*Gawain*, 2000, p. 185). Gawain tries to treat the lady as it befits a knight within the confines of the courtly love tradition.

The courtly love tradition highlights the role of women in medieval romance. Beer (1970) observes that romance often emphasizes "a major role to women and to affairs of love" (p. 24). In *Gawain,* the contrast between the seduction scenes and the hunting scenes underscores a rift between the feminine courtly love ideal and the masculine pursuit of hunting. Beer (1970) points out that "the increased role of women" helps establish the "feminine" nature of the genre (p. 25). This feminine quality is evident in Lady Bercilak's attempts to seduce Gawain, as she uses guile to entice him to sin. Gawain acknowledges his submission to the enchantress's commands and kisses (*Gawain*, 2000, pp. 188, 190, 189). Beer (1970) emphasizes the significance of courtly love through its "fantasy of female dominance" (p. 23). Expected patterns and roles are reversed; the lady "takes the initiative with genial aggression" (Wright, 1986, p. 81). Gawain's being metaphorically hunted by the lady indicates that courtly love allows women to wield significant influence over knights. His acquiescence to wearing the girdle, despite its personal significance, illustrates his entrapment by the lady's influence. However, the narrative reveals a twist: Lord Bercilak orchestrates the seduction as part of a scheme, making the female dominance appear as a fabrication. He confesses to Gawain: "And the wooing of my wife- it was all my scheme! / She made trial of a man most faultless by far / Of all that ever walked over the wide earth" (*Gawain*, 2000, p. 206). Moreover, Lord Bercilak's actions are guided by Morgan le Faye, Arthur's half-sister and a known enchantress who seeks to create trouble for Arthur. Thus, the apparent dominance of the lady is ultimately revealed as an illusion, manipulated by her husband and further complicated by Morgan le Faye's involvement. Lord Bercilak tells Gawain: "She guided me in this guise to your glorious hall, / To assay, if such it were, the surfeit of pride / That is rumoured of the retinue of the Round Table" (*Gawain*, 2000, p. 208). The influence of the female principle reasserts itself through Morgan le Faye, who orchestrates the entire plot, including the temptation of Gawain by Lady Bercilak. Fisher (2000) notes that "bonds among men are both affirmed and threatened (and sometimes at once) by women" (p. 152). In *Gawain,* the male camaraderie is tested and disrupted by Morgan le Faye's manipulations, highlighting how the feminine principle can challenge and destabilize male bonds. Morgan le Fay is also depicted as having a secondary motive in sending the Green Knight to Arthur's court: she intends to terrify Queen Guinevere into a state of deathly fear using the Green Knight's monstrous presence. This reveals how the feminine

principle not only threatens the male order but also works against another woman. Fisher (2000) asserts that the "threat of the woman as a free agent [embodied by Morgan le Fay] who can construct her own exchanges with men is undermined and marginalized by being projected onto Morgan's jealousy of Arthur's wife" (p. 154). By portraying Morgan as a threat to Guinevere, the narrative diminishes her power and subverts her influence, which disrupts the male order that Arthur's court is built upon. This portrayal also reflects the medieval misogyny embedded in the romance genre and suggests that late medieval English writers might have harboured anxieties about masculinity (Fisher, 2000, p. 162).

Departure from Traditional Medieval Romances in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

Romance, as Fredric Jameson (1981) contends, is not merely a naive invocation of a prelapsarian order for the individual reader; rather, it represents a dynamic and nuanced reinvention that continually responds to an evolving historical, political and social context. This "secular scripture," as Northrop Frye (1976) describes the romance, continues to thrive from the archetypal Garden of Eden to modern reinterpretations. A seventeenth-century take on the romance, Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1615), often considered to be the first modern novel, shows an old man who nostalgically yearns for a vanished world of chivalric medieval romance and loses his sanity because of his obsession with this literary genre. The medieval world of romances is a lost world into which the pseudo-knight of Cervantes relapses, and it is this quality of Cervantes' narrative which renders it a modern novel. Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) explains how the modern novel differs from the medieval romance, arguing that these two genres constitute opposite poles, and that the romance suggests "a transparency of language" while the novel introduces "a plurality of languages, discourses, and voices" (p. 66). The rupture in Don Quixote's psyche stems from the intrusion of this plurality of discourses and voices. Even before the Early Modern period, the medieval romance as a genre is interrogated in the late fourteenth century, when Bakhtin's dialogical imagination may be seen in its embryonic form, and the plurality of discourses and voices leaks into the world of the romance. This plurality of voices and languages causes the romance hero to have internal conflicts. Hence, written just prior to modernity, *Gawain* diverges from the traditional model of medieval romances as it is "a work that shatters and inverts the medieval literary conventions" (Chance, 1986, p. 45). The Gawain-poet is claimed to have "a sophisticated awareness of romance as a literary genre" and to play "a game with both the hero's and the readers' expectations of what is supposed to happen in a romance" (Abrams, 2000, p. 12). This consciousness of the poet about the genre of the romance evinces that he is ironically distanced from the tradition of medieval romances. Besides the poet's ironic distancing, the use of ironic reversals of generic features, and the inversions of traditional pairs of active and passive, masculine and feminine, initiator and follower, the romance hero's introspection and interiority that results from his internal conflicts, and his ambivalent and shifting identity characterise *Gawain*. The interior life of the individual and the psychological probing in this romance point to a gesturing

towards a modern horizon of sensibility and emotions such as anger, fear, humiliation and shame.

Gawain represents the late fourteenth-century world in which it was written, which is a world in transition, where "the Middle Ages were passing away and the Renaissance struggled to be born" (Cantor, 2004, p. 4). Cantor argues that the deposition of Richard II and the succession of Henry IV in 1399 is a token of the end of medieval monarchy (p. 219). Likewise, the fact that "the heavily armoured knight fighting on horseback" had become outmoded by 1400 signals the end of the medieval world of romances (Cantor, 2004, p. 222). The waning of the Middle Ages is also seen in the rise of a new consciousness about and sensitivity to "the complexities of individual psychology" (Cantor, 2004, p. 224). Morgan (2010) states that the primary interest of conventional medieval poetry is moral and not psychological, which shows that *Gawain* is not a conventional romance (p. 1). Thus, as opposed to the knights of conventional medieval romances, Gawain's world is pregnant with a new horizon of sensibility and susceptibility to emotions such as anger, fear, and shame. Embarrassment and humiliation are fundamental to *Gawain* (Burrow, 1984; Pugh, 2008). Gawain feels these emotions as he undergoes "all the painful stages of self-recognition" and exhibits "a capacity for bearing his shame and turning it into the story of his life that puts him with the Ancient Mariner rather than with Yvain or Lancelot or Tristram" (Pearsall, 2003, p. 80). That Pearsall argues that Gawain "drops into the abyss of the interior self" and couples him with Coleridge's mariner, a Romantic figure of the nineteenth century, rather than the heroes of the Middle Ages, demonstrates that the characterisation of Gawain with a particular focus on his interiority resonates with figures from the Modern Era (p. 80).

Instead of focusing on external conflict, *Gawain* delves into internal struggles, as the knight vacillates between the ideals represented by the pentangle and the temptations symbolized by the girdle. The girdle is "placed cunningly in juxtaposition with the pentangle" (Morgan, 2010, p. 21). The Gawain-poet uses this tension to critique the ethos of knighthood and transform the romance genre, making it an exceptional example among English romance narratives (Hahn, 2000, p. 222). Besides, Cooper (2004) notes that the poem challenges the concept of perfectibility within the genre, demonstrating the impossibility of achieving true perfection (p. 370). Gawain's imperfection, marked by his oscillation between the pentangle and the girdle, contrasts sharply with the idealized hero of traditional romances. As Tolkien (1975) observes, this portrayal of a flawed hero, rather than an infallible ideal, offers a more nuanced view of human character and makes a significant departure from conventional representations (p. 16).

The dialectical interplay between the pentangle and the girdle reveals how the romance explores the human psyche. The fantastical elements of the narrative are imbued with psychological significance, reflecting not only the irrational aspects of human experience but also the internal struggles of the questing hero. According to Beer (1970), the romance is marked by "the force of the subconscious," concerned with "psychic

responsibilities" and "the radical impulses of human experience" and delves into emotions such as fear, self-concern, courage, and despair, and incorporates "complex psychological analysis" (pp. 7, 9, 12, 17).

Due to these dialectical shifts, Gawain's journey through the wild landscape can be seen as a journey into his inner self. Consequently, Gawain's adventure can be interpreted as an inward quest. Traditional romances often feature familiar settings, such as forests and battlefields, with key or climactic moments occurring in intimate, domestic spaces like bedrooms (Hahn, 2000, p. 224). In contrast, *Gawain* juxtaposes domestic scenes in Lord Bercilak's bedroom with outdoor hunting scenes, but the real focus is on the hero's psychological landscape. This internal struggle is what distinguishes Gawain from conventional medieval romance heroes. Riddy (2000) observes that the action has shifted from traditional heroic arenas to domestic settings, resulting in a "new opaque interiority in the scrutiny of conscience" and a focus on the hero's mental state (pp. 240-41). This new layer of interiority adds complexity to the hero, revealing his inner conflicts and sense of fragmentation. Pearsall (2003) argues that Gawain's world reflects real feelings, fears, and internal conflicts, rather than just traditional heroic questions (p. 77). This shift in genre exposes the ideal knight's contradictions and flaws, highlighting the hero's internal disunity. By the end of the romance, Gawain is deeply embarrassed and aware of the disparity between his public ideals and private self, as Pearsall (2003) notes: "To show a fictional character capable of being embarrassed and humiliated in the way that Gawain is embarrassed and humiliated is a new art of the interior self […] that is being disentangled from the fictions of chivalry that had prevailed" (p. 80). Thus, Gawain's portrayal as a flawed, mortified human with his "questionable" victory contrasts sharply with the idealized, flawless knights of traditional romances (Fries, 1986, p. 70).

Psychological insights into *Gawain* can be explored through Jungian archetypes. Frye (2000) suggests that romances do not aim to depict "real people" but rather stylized figures that embody psychological archetypes, with elements such as Jung's libido, anima, and shadow reflected in the hero, heroine, and villain respectively (p. 304). This approach provides a deep understanding of the human psyche within the romance genre. Wrigley (1988) explores Gawain's journey as a rite of passage, marking his transition from innocence to experience (p. 116). He argues that the hero's journey through wild landscapes symbolizes his maturation, as he confronts inner fears and learns to cope with solitude and challenges (p. 117). Wrigley also interprets the beheading game as a form of symbolic castration, with Gawain's neck wound representing a ritualistic initiation (p. 121). This Freudian perspective highlights the archetypal pattern of symbolic castration in the hero's development. Wrigley further posits that Lady Bercilak represents an archetypal temptress, akin to Eve, who tries to seduce Gawain and induce him to break his vow (p. 126). Her promise of the girdle's protection ultimately leads to Gawain's wound, symbolizing human mortality. Brewer (1983) expands on this by framing the story as an Oedipal drama, where the Green Knight is a father-figure, Lady Bercilak embodies the seductive maternal aspect, and Morgan le Fay represents the malevolent

mother figure (p. 165). This Oedipal dimension reveals how the romance engages with deep psychological themes through its archetypal characters and narrative structure. Thus, the romance provides significant psychological insight through its use of archetypal patterns and the marvellous.

Conclusion

To conclude, *Gawain* both adheres to and subverts the romance genre's conventions. It features traditional elements such as a historical setting, vivid sensory details, quests, archetypes, the marvellous, a ritualized code of conduct, allegory, and courtly love. However, it also challenges the genre by presenting an unconventional hero. Unlike the idealized, unblemished heroes of traditional romances, Gawain is depicted as a flawed and conflicted character. His internal strife, symbolized by his oscillation between the male principle represented by the pentangle and the female principle symbolized by the girdle, transforms his journey into a metaphorical exploration of the mind. This introspective journey prefigures the psychological depth seen in early modern literature, where characters like Hamlet similarly navigate complex internal conflicts and value systems.

Written on the cusp of modernity, *Gawain* departs from the conventional framework of medieval romances by subverting and redefining their literary norms. The Gawain-poet demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of the romance genre, engaging in a deliberate play with both the hero's and the audience's expectations of typical romance narratives. This self-awareness reveals the poet's ironic detachment from the medieval romance tradition. Furthermore, the poet employs ironic reversals of traditional genre elements and disrupts established dichotomies such as giver and taker, lover and beloved, leader and follower. The hero's introspection, shaped by internal conflicts and his fluid, ambiguous identity, is a defining feature of the work. The emphasis on the hero's inner life and the psychological exploration of emotions like anger, fear, humiliation, and shame signal a move towards a more modern sensibility and emotional depth.

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